

ARMADILLO AND OTHER STORIES

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A THESIS PRESENTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE  
OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS

UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

1996

GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

Thesis/Dissertation Title: Armadillo and Other Stories

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Most of these stories are set in North Florida and the rest in France. They are concerned with separation and loss, with love and death, and in all of them the people do the best they can.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank Noy Holland for her guidance and generosity. I thank Sidney Wade and William Logan for their patience and advice. I thank Daniel Bourgeron, D.M. Thomas, Grace Paley, Beverly Gordey, and Peter Christopher for their encouragement. And I thank George Jay O'Leary for all of these things as well as the time and love he has given me.

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Abstract of Thesis Presented to the Graduate School  
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By

Suzanne Carlton O'Leary

December 1996

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Major Department: English

Most of these stories are set in North Florida and the rest in France. They are concerned with separation and loss, with love and death, and in all of them the people do the best they can.

## THE GRAND DUKE

My mother has been dead for a long time, and for a long time I have been married to Alvis Honeysuckle. Like my mother, Alvis has soft cold hands and pale freckled skin and moles on his back and belly. After my mother died I didn't know how to live without her, so I married a man as much like her as I could find.

Alvis and I live in a house in the country. The house has been in Alvis's family for over a hundred years. The walls are made of stone.

"There are ghosts," I told Alvis once. Noises overhead. "This old stone house is full of dead people," I said.

"It's the Grand Duke," he said. The Grand Duke was the owl that lived in the attic, coming and going through a small screenless window. One Sunday night after Alvis and I had gone to bed, I heard something scrambling, clawing.

"Did you hear it?" I said, and poked Alvis in the back. I always slept by the window and he always slept with his back to me. He didn't want to sleep on his left side

because he had heard somewhere that sleeping on your heart shortens your life.

"Rats," he said, half asleep. "The cold weather must've driven them in from the fields."

"It's that owl," I said. "He's got something."

Light pried the closed shutters of our bedroom window. I pressed my body to Alvis's. "I want to make love," I said.

I felt desperate and frightened.

"Please," I said.

"I'm tired." Alvis reached around and squeezed my bottom. "I love you, Selma. You know I love you."

I thought of a doll I used to have, a Chatty Cathy. My father had bought her for me after my favorite doll was torn apart by the neighbor's Doberman. My favorite doll had blond hair and wore a pink and gold net skirt and had belonged to my mother when she was a girl. Chatty Cathy had freckles and wore tennis shoes, and if you pulled the string in her back she said "I love you," or "I'm tired!" My father had taken me to the toy store to buy her, to buy any doll I wanted. It was the only time I remember him doing such a thing.

The morning after I heard the owl and Alvis was too tired to make love to me, I didn't get up in time to make it to my job as a travel agent. I'm one of those people who sit behind a desk and draw red lines up and down Interstates and blue lines on scenic trails. Sometimes the customers are so enthusiastic about where they're going I want to scream. Unlike many of my customers, I have not even been out of the state and barely out of the county, which is okay. I like staying home so much that lately I have been missing a lot of work. Alvis hasn't got a clue, but I know he wouldn't like it. I stay around the house watching the latest talk show host ask women how they feel about their fat thighs and unfaithful husbands.

That morning, after the talk shows ended, I decided to go to the cemetery where my parents are buried, a hot and treeless acre of land thick with sandspurs. Now and then some optimistic survivor plants a dogwood or a crape myrtle, but the soil is sandy and nothing can grow. I hadn't been there in a while. I usually take white plastic roses for the granite vases. White holds up well against the sun, but I figured some new ones were probably in order.

As I drove into the cemetery, I noticed a new double tombstone. A likeness of Maury's Hamburger Stand had been engraved into a beige stone and painted in vivid colors.



Tiny customers laughed and talked at outside tables under giant oaks as Maury and Mary Gulliver leaned into each other, waving from behind the counter. I remembered how the Gullivers used to make great grilled-onion hamburgers and vanilla shakes.

I parked in front of where my parents are buried, and saw an American flag stuck in the dirt at the foot of my father's grave. The flag had started to rot. My father had been in the Second World War. I don't know much about his life. He died when I was barely ten years old.

A psychologist told me once that I was lucky my father had died. Otherwise he might have really screwed up my life. I don't know why this might be so unless it was his fondness for women. He died suddenly, falling flat on his face on the sidewalk. The skin on his nose got scraped off and his eyes were bruised. If somebody hadn't known better, they might have thought my father had died in a fight rather than of a heart attack.

A few days after his funeral my mother took me to a woman's house. The woman gave me some doll clothes she had sewn herself. A silk evening gown, tiny silver slippers, white lacy underwear the size of a bottle cap-- too small for Chatty Cathy. "Are you my mother?" I had wanted to ask. I grew up thinking I had been adopted.

The woman was my father's secretary, but sometimes I wonder if she was also his mistress. My parents never got along. Once my father tied my mother to a chair and beat her with his belt. She just sat there, her head bowed. I watched from the hall and the living room. I cried but not loud enough so that they could hear. They must have thought I was sleeping in the front bedroom, the big bedroom with the blue walls and the fireplace where blackbirds nested.

I thought of all this looking at the rotten flag. A dusty-rose Lincoln pulled up at a nearby plot and sunlight jetted off the hood. A grey-haired woman in a flowered chiffon dress floated out of the car and over the sandy road, the dried-up grass. I smelled something sweet, like honeysuckle. I touched my breasts. I remembered my mother's hands moving like feathers over my skin, coaxing me into sleep. I wanted to dig up my parents' bodies. I wanted to know if they still looked the same. Each of them had been buried in concrete shells meant to keep their bodies fresh from decay for more than half a century.

Once I thought I loved Alvis, his skin so like my mother's. The sun burned the back of my neck.

"The Gulliver couple died," I told Alvis that evening. He and I were sitting in the glider on the front porch.

"The hamburger people."

"How about a hamburger for dinner?" I grinned.

He pushed us off. "I am hungry."

He always was.

The Grand Duke appeared, gliding toward the oak in the front lawn. He was white, a shock against the darkening sky.

"Look," I said. But by the time Alvis looked up, the owl had disappeared.

"How about a picnic?" Alvis said. "Out at Spring Lake."

"Are you feeling sick or what?"

"Forget it."

On the way to Spring Lake we stopped by Angel's Drive-In and picked up hamburgers and fries and two jumbo iced teas. Spring Lake was only about twenty minutes from the house, but between working all day and watching reruns in the evening, there wasn't much time for going anywhere. I guess you could say we were stagnating. Alvis and I had not done much of anything since I had tried to get pregnant a couple of years back. Then we had gone on get-away-weekends, to the circus, anything to help us relax.

Alvis turned into a clearing and the truck lights flickered over the water. A rope dangled from a limb. Probably kids, I thought. Only kids who thought they would live forever could enjoy swimming here. Nobody lived on

Spring Lake. People fished for bass during the day and hunted alligators and frogs at night, shining a flashlight over the water until it found a pair of eyes. I had heard stories about people falling out of boats and getting tangled up in beds of water moccasins and thinking at first that they had fallen into barbed wire.

Alvis turned off the engine and the lights and then put his arm around me. He said something but his words were muffled in my hair, and I couldn't hear. I looked at him, his long nose, his pale skin. "I love you," I heard him say this time. I heard my mother trying to breathe. Her body didn't give up just like that. A weak body is stronger than I had ever imagined.

## RUE DU COMMERCE

When I got pregnant, my mother-in-law was so excited she bought a tiny chair and kept it in her living room. I got sick and weak. I had trouble climbing the two flights of stairs to our flat. I wanted to eat bread and butter and chocolate bars. Most of all I wanted to sleep. Then, I started thinking that I couldn't do it, couldn't have a baby.

I asked my husband, Luc, "What do you want? What do you think?"

He said it was up to me. He said he had started staring at himself in shop windows, surprised at his own reflection. He was terrified of being responsible for another living being.

By the time I was old enough to watch beans sprout out of Dixie cups, I had learned that people you love go away or die and there is nothing you can do about it. My favorite memory of my father is the time he helped me plant the bean seeds. It was probably the only kind thing he ever did. "Run," my mother would tell me when my father was angry. "Run run run." And I would head out the back door

and hide under the house, where the brick pillars sagged into the dark damp ground.

Luc lied to his mother. He told her that I'd had a miscarriage. He didn't want to say that I had had an abortion because I didn't think I could love a child. Every night for several days his mother came to visit me in the two-room flat Luc and I shared on rue du Commerce. She cried and hugged me, and I looked over her shoulder at the wall.

I took time off from my job teaching English to French businessmen. I lay in bed. It was late spring and getting hot. I closed the curtains against the sun. I listened to the slow buzz of flies excited by the heat and drawn to the cool dark inside our flat. The flies fumbled against the glass. I listened to the woman in the flat above us vacuuming, vacuuming, listened when the woman watered the red geraniums and purple pansies she tended in white plastic window boxes, listened to the water splashing on the closed windows of my bedroom, spattering the glass with dirt and bits of green leaves. I never heard the woman go out. I started to bleed and didn't know why. I bled and bled. The doctor gave Luc antibiotics and needles. The French are great believers in medicine administered from the rear.

"I wish you were dead," I told Luc the second time he stuck my bottom with that needle.

"Relax." He aimed again.

"Ouch," I said. "I hope you burn in hell."

Evenings Luc brought two small cakes, raspberry or chocolate-layer, from the bakery, and a bottle of red wine and wedges of Boursin, smelly soft cheese wrapped in wax paper. We ate on television trays and watched the puppets on Canal Plus and then a movie, usually an American made-for-television movie, lots of guns and shapely women. Or we watched "The Invisible Man" or "Mission Impossible," "Dragnet," or "The Saint." Then we brushed and flossed our teeth and went to bed.

"Bonne nuit," Luc would say. "Bons reves."

"Good night," I would repeat in English. "Good dreams."

We slept back to back. Now and then we would try to make love. I would get on top of him; he didn't seem to have the energy to do much else. The bedroom was as dark as I imagined it had been in the blackouts during the war. We made love without seeing each other.

Mornings Luc made me coffee and left croissants fresh from the bakery on the kitchen counter. He was good to me in that way.

In the fall I decided not to go back to the English school and instead found a job at a nearby children's nursery. My first day at the nursery, a man was standing in a doorway where I needed to pass. A child, a girl in a red dress, had both arms around one of his legs. "Hello," he said. He touched the back of the girl's head.

He must be eighteen or nineteen, I thought. He looked like a young Belmondo. In April I would be thirty. I was skinny and had red hair cut blunt. He was the most beautiful man I had ever seen.

I learned that his name was Gabriel. He had just graduated from high school and was working toward a certificate in child care. At lunch we walked along the river eating hot dogs smothered in Swiss cheese and drinking apple cider. He told me that his mother had died when he was eight and that he and his father had fought a lot. Gabriel had lived in the streets for a while. He remembered how his mother smelled of lavender when she hugged him. He remembered how her bedroom, the room where she lay dead, smelled of lavender for days after she had been taken away.

One lunch hour we took the Metro to the eighteenth arrondissement and Gabriel showed me where he lived--in a dingy building in a dangerous part of Paris. Gabriel's



street was empty compared to Rue du Commerce, where Luc and I lived. There were no flower sellers or shops selling cheese and wine, delicate cakes and chocolate, croissants. Instead the shops were shelved with strange fruits and vegetables, live chickens and goats, rabbits. Iron bars striped the windows.

\*

In the beginning of November when night fell fast, when snow fell and bombs from unhappy extremists started exploding in the subway and in parked cars outside schools, Luc started working in the South of France. I got tired of sleeping alone. I wondered why I had ever married Luc in the first place.

One night when he was gone, I closed the door to the flat quietly, turned the key in the lock, and ran down the stairs, round and round, down five flights, almost soundlessly, my footsteps padded by the worn carpet tacked on the polished wood.

Snow had started to fall, not big, wet flakes, but the kind of flakes that when the wind blows feel like ice picks pricking the skin.

I ran the three blocks to the subway. It was past midnight and there was a long wait between trains.

The trash cans outside the door of Gabriel's building were overloaded. I stepped over a dirty diaper and an empty can, the cut edges of the can like the ruffled edges of the socks I had worn as a girl. The door of the building was unlocked.

On the second landing I heard a television playing. Light shone through the keyhole and under the door. A month ago police had found the skeleton of a woman sitting in an easy chair in this building. The television had been playing for months.

I climbed up to the third landing and knocked. Gabriel opened the door.

"I just came by," I said.

"Okay," he said. He smiled and invited me to come inside. He didn't seem at all surprised.

"Give me a minute." He broke a flimsy board over one bent knee. "I'll get a fire going."

He told me he furnished his flat with things he found in the trash. There were orange crates, old lamps with stained, yellow shades, a straight chair that looked to have been gnawed by a dog.

"It's amazing what you find," I said.

Gabriel's bed sheets were white and smelled of baby powder. He lifted me up and turned me over, told me to grab

the headboard, to wrap my hands tight around the iron bars and not to let go. "I love you," I almost said. I didn't think that I had ever loved anybody before, had ever felt anything ever, really, for anyone else. I smelled baby powder and thought of my mother, and of powder, of my mother powdering me.

On my way home I looked at everything carefully, at the gray of the light of the early morning, the buildings, the hazy yellow headlights of the cars. My breasts ached. A woman jogged over the Pont Neuf. On the corner of the street a man lay bundled up in a yellow plaid blanket, his head turned toward the wall. At the butcher shop near where I lived, corpses of cows slick and pink hung along the back wall. The lights of the shop were bright white, and a man in a blue work coat swished water over the concrete floor with a wide broom.

When I was growing up, my mother worked at a local nursing home Sundays and most holidays. We celebrated Christmas and Easter, Thanksgiving, all on the wrong days.

On Sundays I went with my father to church. Every Sunday he and I sat on the second row on the side of the church facing north, facing the old cemetery. He had his black Bible open across his lap. I played with my doll until he told me that I was too old for dolls and had to

listen to the pastor. I never listened. I watched the squares of colored light stretch across the sun-faded carpet. I watched Nola Johns play the organ, her feet barely reaching the pedals, and thought what small feet Nola Johns had, and how stiff her back was, as stiff as my hard, plastic doll.

One day my father told me what all the adults had known for years. Nola had killed her own baby. The baby was only a few weeks old when Nola submerged it in a sink full of water. Afterwards she called her mother to tell her what she had done.

Nola's husband left her.

Rumor was that she had had a lover who wanted her but not the baby. The lover was never named.

Nola went into a mental hospital. After a few years, she came back to live with her mother in the small house on Lake Street, a small house with a screened-in porch.

Nola walked stiffly, as if she were in a trance, as if she felt nothing. My father said that Nola had had shock treatment. He told me this should be a lesson to me. He said that I should never love anything or anyone more than I loved God.

I saw Gabriel whenever I could--in the afternoon with gray light coming through the dusty windows of his

apartment, and at night, the nights when Luc was in Marseilles. Gabriel rubbed sliced apricots on my belly and my breasts and licked the juice off. He blindfolded me with a faded gold scarf he found in the trash and made love to me--his lips like the lips of a stranger, soft on the inside of my arms, legs, the back of my neck. I craved him the way I imagined anybody craves anybody or anything that makes you feel alive.

Gabriel started taking me out with him after dark to rummage through trash. Except for parked cars and trash cans, the narrow, cobbled streets were usually deserted late at night.

One night I heard wheels turning, slowly, then faster. "Do you hear it?" I said.

"What?" Gabriel said.

"Wheels, turning."

He stuck his head into a giant green trash can, his black sneakers lifting gently off the concrete. There were holes in the rubbery soles.

"It's starting to snow," I said. Snow flurried under the street lamp.

"Don't worry," he said, straightening up. He brushed snow off my shoulders. "I'm not worried so why should you be?"

When we got back to his flat Gabriel turned on the shower. He took off my clothes and laid them on the toilet seat.

He lathered soap in his hands and washed me. The act reminded me of my mother, of the big, aluminum tub she used to set in the middle of the kitchen floor where she'd bathe me, then let me play in the sudsy water while she cooked dinner. Gabriel squeezed my bottom hard, squeezed my hands behind my back until they burned inside. I closed my eyes. I thought of my father, of the outline of his hand, blue and black, left on the outside of my thigh. Gabriel sucked my breasts, the nipples, dug his teeth into my skin, drawing me up and into his mouth. "You're hurting me," I said. I did not stop him. When I opened my eyes I saw blood and soap bubbles whirling in the water at my feet.

\*

Luc came home weekends. I would not let him touch me. He didn't seem to mind.

One Friday Luc stood in the doorway pulling the knot out of his tie. He looked pale and tired. He told me that he had seen a doctor in the South of France for his annual work checkup. The doctor said he thought Luc might have some kind of virus and had taken a blood sample.

"Are you afraid?" I asked.

"Are you?"

I thought about it for a moment. "I don't know."

"I haven't been with anybody else," he said.

I didn't believe him, though I had no reason not to.

I remembered something I had read, an article that said anybody who had sex with strangers wanted to die--you should know your partner as well as you know your own hands. But my own hands were always surprising me. The sun, whether weak or strong, would bring out a new freckle, or one of my hands would sting in soapy dishwater and I would find a place where I had cut myself.

I stared at Luc, studying him for signs of fear or remorse, for anything. He stared at the television. I imagined the child I did not have, asleep in my arms. The child smelled of sweat and baby powder. Its breathing was warm and damp on the inside of my arm.

The Friday-night horror film was on.

"It must have been made in Florida," I said.

I could tell by the billboards along the coastline advertising orange juice, by the conch shells stacked up along the streets for sale.

Gabriel wasn't expecting me. It was late afternoon and cold. I had a Christmas present for him, a wool sweater,

wrapped in shiny red paper and white shredded ribbons.

"I'm cold," I said, as soon as I saw him standing in the doorway.

He took my hands, pulled them inside his shirt, pressed them to his chest.

Then I saw the women standing at the window. One woman had razored hair and was wearing only a short, black skirt and black ankle boots. Leaning against the wall beside her was a tall, dark-haired woman, her neck arched back. The tall woman lifted her head and looked at me, her hair wild, tangled.

"They're my sisters-in-law," Gabriel said.

"You take me to look in trash cans," I said. "Where do you take them?"

"I don't take you," he said. "You come along because you like looking in other people's garbage."

As if it were nothing, as if she were alone, the razor-haired woman pulled her skirt over her head, and hung it on the radiator underneath the window.

She looked like an ivory doll.

I ran. I ran down the stairs expecting to hear laughter. Halfway down the block Gabriel caught up with me.

"You're going to break my arm," I said.

"You forgot this." He dropped the package.



I spit in his face and bit his arm hard. He slapped me and grabbed both of my arms behind my back and began pulling me along, dragging me when I stumbled, and then carrying me as a child might a teddy bear or doll, under one arm. When he got to an alley he turned into it, slammed my back against the brick wall. I felt his hand cold on the inside of my thigh and then I felt him inside me. I held his head in my arms. I heard wheels turning faster, then slower, then faster and realized the wheels were inside my own head, turning turning. Gabriel shoved far inside me until I did not care if I lived or died.

"I'm bleeding," I said, tasting the blood. "What have you done?"

Gabriel lifted me up. I thought of Nancy McCall, the paper doll I played with as a child. When Nancy gets married, her groom picks her up gently, always gently, and carries her over the threshold of their lovely, warm home. Then I thought nothing.

I heard water running and opened my eyes. I was lying in Gabriel's bed. I looked over and saw him standing, naked, magnificent, in the light of the bathroom door. "You love me," I said.

The next morning I woke to the sound of cars honking and people yelling in the street. Gray light fell over the

bed. The back of my head ached and there was blood underneath my fingernails.

I got up. I looked for him in the bathroom, in the living room, the kitchen. I looked at the clock on the wall over the stove but it didn't have any hands. I sat in the straight chair by the window. I looked at the old lamps, the orange crates. I understood--Gabriel wasn't coming back this morning or probably any morning. What did he have to come back for but some things he had found in the trash?

When I stood my legs felt weak. I closed the door behind me without locking it. It was cool in the stairs, and for a moment I stood there in the dark, in the quiet. Then there was the sound of a door opening above and I started down.

At the bottom of the stairs a dark-skinned woman with a baby secured to her back with a piece of bright yellow material was bending over a flat grill. I smelled sausages cooking. The baby's head bobbed. Small hands grabbed air.

"He told me to tell the red-haired woman that he was going fishing with his sisters-in-law," she said. "He gave me money to say this thing." She smiled and her teeth were white and very beautiful in her dark face.

The subway train pulled up and I got in and as the doors closed behind me, I fell into a seat. A legless man

sat on the floor, an empty wheelchair beside him. He kept trying to pull his body up onto a folding seat. Each time he pulled the seat down and began to pull himself up, the seat popped closed. Another man, his eyes snowy, the skin around his eyes twisted, scarred, played an accordion.

I looked away, and saw my face in the window--pale, freckled skin, red hair sticking up. I hated mirrors. I never looked at myself except when I had to, and never where the light was good. I looked mad, crazed, like the children from the local asylum I had seen as a girl on parade days sitting and standing on bleachers along the avenue waiting for floats, for stuffed giant alligators, and for the sleek sequined bodies of the majorettes.

When I reached home, I wanted to sleep. The window was open and as started to close it I imagined the child I did not have sitting on the window ledge, her small back straight. I squatted. "Darling, come to Mama," I said. The child turned, and leaning on one chubby arm, looked into the room. "Come to Mama," I said. At first it seemed that the child would not come to me. She turned and looked out at the city, and then she stood and stepped back into the room. I thought that I would have loved this child. The child had Luc's almost black eyes, and her hair was silky-looking, blond, almost white in the early morning sun.

I stopped working at the children's nursery. Gabriel had stopped working there, leaving no forwarding address. Luc continued his work in the South of France and came home on the weekends. I thought how strange it was that so little in our lives appeared to have changed.

What did change is that instead of going to the nursery I went to the park. I put bread crumbs on my head and shoulders and the tops of my legs so that the pigeons and wrens would light there, and I would feel their talons, dulled from running around on the concrete searching for food, I would feel their talons sink into my skin and I sat there as quietly as I could so as not to frighten them away.

## THE FROGS

Whenever the telephone rings or Bert hears his wife, Evelyn, dialing, he slips into the hall. One day Bert hears her say that she is sadder than she ever imagined possible. "My Bert is losing his mind," she says.

Bert looks down the hall at the sunlight slanting through the screen door.

"It's the frogs," she says.

"Frogs?" Bert says, so loudly he's afraid Evelyn has heard.

She hasn't.

"Something must be wrong in the environment," she says worriedly. "Remember when there were frogs everywhere?"

Bert can still remember the frogs and how when he was a boy they lived in the trees. Some of them got lodged between the windows and the screens and died. Bert would find their soft green bodies and put them in a shoe box. At first they stank and then they rotted to brittle skeletons that looked like tiny dinosaurs.

Every morning Bert reads the Florida Times Union, but he never sees anything about the frogs. He used to support

Evelyn and their children by delivering the newspaper. Now that he's retired he reads the funnies and the front page. When he remembers, and before he forgets, Bert tears the date off the top corner of the back page and keeps it in his shirt pocket. Evelyn finds the scraps of paper in his pockets when she does laundry.

Sometimes he hears Evelyn say that she remembers Bert as a young man. Back then he went to school at the university in Gainesville. He was smart and understood a lot about numbers and building things. He also owned a car, a Model-T, something Evelyn's father didn't have. When Evelyn was growing up she lived in a screenless shack on Orange Lane with four brothers and three sisters and their parents. Mornings her mother gave her the job of sweeping the clay yard to keep sprigs of grass from taking root.

Bert can remember Evelyn the first time he saw her--dressed in a cotton dress that fit close and sweeping the front yard. He had known the day he saw Evelyn that he would marry her, and when he asked, Evelyn didn't hesitate.

Sometimes, when Bert is alone in the attic building birdhouses, he wonders if he would know that he is losing his mind if he hadn't heard Evelyn say so. It's all he can think about sometimes, and sometimes it's more than he can stand.

Bert concentrates on learning something new each day. He does this by watching television. There is always something that he has never heard of or seen before. Last night on "Jeopardy," Bert learned that hummingbirds may be warriors who have died and come back to life. This is what the Aztecs believed, and Bert figures he is nobody to argue with anybody else's beliefs. Live and let live, he has always said. Bert has considered building a hummingbird house. It would have to be the tiniest thing since their nests are less than an inch across. He has seen red-throated hummingbirds no bigger than his thumb at the four o'clocks outside the kitchen window. The hummingbirds fly forward and then backward. Their wings beat so fast they appear perfectly still.

Bert tries to figure if he would qualify as a warrior. He fought in World War II but was taken prisoner early on. He can remember being boarded onto a train in Paris that would take him to a prison camp along the border of France and Germany. A Frenchman spit in his face and said that he didn't like foreigners. For most of the war Bert waited in the camp and expected to die.

Bert spends more and more time alone in the attic. Once he had wanted to build his family a house. He had gotten a good start on it and then quit. He has no memory of why he quit but knows that he did because all that

exists are the concrete foundation and several block walls of varying heights. It was going to be a larger and sturdier house than the wood frame one where he and Evelyn live and where they raised six children, all grown now and living on their own. He can't remember where all of them are living, but he is certain that there are six of them-- four boys and two girls. On Father's Day he receives cards and sometimes food items such as raspberry jam and champagne. Evelyn does most of the talking to the children when they call. Bert hears her tell them that their father sends his love.

Evelyn makes Bert apple pies and perks strong black coffee for him. Since anybody can remember she has brought his meals to him on a tray. He sits in his faded armchair three feet from the television and between the front door and the wood stove. He waits for her to prepare a tray and carry it to him.

One night after a dinner of chicken and rice, and after his coffee, Bert decides to build that hummingbird house. He sets his tray beside his chair and takes the flashlight and goes out to the garage to find a hammer and some nails. Once in the garage he remembers that the things he wants are in the attic.

"It's cold out here, Evelyn," he says, when she finds him standing, lost, in the yard. He holds the flashlight



down at his side, shining it on his old loafers.

"But Bert, dear, it's the middle of July." She takes his hand and leads him toward the house.

"I didn't know which way to go," he says.

He vomits and vomits, bent over the toilet. His legs give way and Evelyn cannot get him up. She pulls on his long arms and grabs his middle, tries to lift him, but it's no use. She calls her older daughter, Zenith, who insists on calling an ambulance.

"Your father will hate that," Evelyn says.

But he doesn't. He is like a child in the paramedics' hands, doing whatever he is told, as if he has been waiting all his life for somebody to lift him up and onto a stretcher and feel for his pulse. "Hummingbirds are little fighters," he tells the men in white coats, and the men look at each other and smile.

The last night in the hospital Bert wakes to the sound of a million frogs. He calls for Evelyn but there is no answer. He bounds out of bed, knocks a water glass from the bedside table. When he tries to stand, he cuts his knees and the bottoms of his feet.

"I should have been here," Evelyn says in the morning. "I thought that with the nurses and the doctors, you'd be fine."

Bert doesn't say anything at first. He sits in the hospital bed, and looks at his knees and feet which are swathed in white gauze. He thinks that after all these years of marriage Evelyn shouldn't have left him alone. She could have slept on a cot beside him. He looks at Evelyn, at her hands, creamy and wrinkled, her fingers so tight around her purse that her knuckles are white.

"I heard the frogs," he says.

Evelyn scrunches her forehead.

"The frogs," he repeats but already he is forgetting what it is about the frogs that bothers him.

"It's the mating season," a nurse says as she comes into the room. "You can't even get to your car without stepping on them, and they are stuck together so that if you step on one you squish both and their eyes bulge funny." She sticks a thermometer under Bert's tongue.

The living room is dark and close. Evelyn is afraid of burglars and of snakes breaking through the screens so she shuts the house up when she is gone. "Welcome home, Bert," she says and gives him a sideways hug, her arm around his waist. "Very nice, very nice," he says, and hobbles to his chair.

"I'll get you a cup of coffee," she says.

When the telephone rings, Bert thinks about going into the hall to listen but he doesn't have to. With the windows closed the house is so quiet that her voice carries. "Who would have thought that a man who did nothing but deliver newspapers and sit around the house would have an ulcer?" he can hear her say. All at once the living room looks unfamiliar and Bert feels odd, like a stranger, and then he hears Evelyn's footsteps in the hall.

## ARMADILLO

My mother learned about her disease when I was born. Things started to make sense to her, her own mother's early death, for example. My mother wondered if her brothers, eight of them, had the same disease, since it was inherited. She might have even wondered about me, about her only child, her daughter.

"My kidneys are as big as footballs," I overheard her tell someone after she had started dialysis, years later, when I was fucking handsome and not so handsome young men, and was living as she said, as we all are, on borrowed time.

The last time my mother slept with my father was the night she got pregnant with me. In her sleep she made the mistake of cupping her body around his curved one. He kicked her, as if trying to shove her out of bed, but at the same time he held onto her arm. Then he let go. My mother told me that there were bruises up and down her thighs and on her bottom for weeks afterwards.

At night, before bed, she and I would hear my father reading his Bible aloud...the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want... I was four and then eight, twelve. Silence, he would say. No one could make a sound while he read. He read for himself.

I would sit in the hall or on the back porch steps watching the night, the stars, the dark jagged limbs of the pecan trees down back. In North Florida where we lived, all but a handful of winter nights were like summer.

My father found other women, girls really. My mother said that he had always liked girls on the verge of womanhood anyway. Maybe he had thought that when he married his desire would fade. Maybe there was a freshness in the girls that didn't last.

\*

I slept with my mother until my father died. She said that she was afraid of fire and didn't want me to sleep upstairs. It never occurred to me that other girls didn't sleep with their mothers. I thought she belonged to me.

She read fairy tales out of a fat green book until they seemed real. She rubbed baby powder on my back, made waves like the ocean through my hair, lifting it and laying it down, smoothing it over my pillow.

A psychic told me once that I was lucky my father died when he did, when I was twelve. If he had lived, I might have killed him. I can understand children who kill their parents. It's easier than one might think. There was something wrong with my father, something in him that made him violent, cruel, or maybe it was only that there was nothing inside of him, that he was empty. He had a weak heart.

My mother didn't pretend to be in mourning. To the funeral she wore a pale pink dress with tiny flowers embroidered around the neck and wrists. She had bought me my first store-made dress, baby blue chiffon over taffeta. Because I asked her to, she hemmed that dress halfway up my thighs.

"Paul hated dark colors," she told surprised funeral-goers. "Paul hated black."

And into the First Baptist Church we marched, mother and daughter, Edith and Laverne Snowdon, the stars of the day.

On the way home she asked the driver of the black limousine to stop by Belk Lindsey's department store. The driver was young and blond, famous for having burned a barn down with a man, his lover, inside. My mother patted his shoulder. "I'll only be a minute." She took my hand (she wasn't about to leave me with him) and pulled me out of the

limo into the sun. We walked over the tarmac and into the plush coolness of the air-conditioned store.

"I'd like a leotard and tights."

The sales lady, plump with grey hair and a plastic name tag that said "Granny," showed my mother an assortment of small, stretchy garments. How would my mother ever get them over her belly? The tights looked like they'd been made for a child.

My mother bit her lip. She couldn't decide. Outside the glass doors we could see the limousine, sunlight glaring off the hood. She knew she had to hurry.

There is only so much time to be alive.

With the life-insurance from my father, she no longer had to work. I guess it wouldn't have seemed like a lot of money to some people, but it was for my mother. It meant she could quit her job at Sunnyland, a home for mentally or physically handicapped children and for adults who were children still. She had worked there for a decade, longer than I could remember. Mornings she would rise at four o'clock to go to work. Sometimes I would wake and see her dressing in the dark, see the white of her uniform and rubber soled shoes.

She joined the only health club for miles around. "Gotta get rid of this," she said and rubbed her hand over

her belly. She laughed. This was years before the fitness craze. Women still wore double-knit almost everything. My mother always believed double-knit, not fried chicken, was the main cause of obesity in Southern women.

She decided to go on a diet. For lunch she drank grapefruit juice and ate open-faced peanut butter sandwiches with orange marmalade.

At night during commercial breaks she'd stand in front of the television jumping rope. She jumped as fast as she could for one minute. Her cheeks flushed underneath freckles. Her coppery hair shone. She was in her late-thirties and beautiful. The rope slapped the polished wood so that we could not hear the voices selling things. When she stopped she would bend over, trying to catch her breath.

She got in shape as much as she could. Her arms were defined and her thighs were taut, but her belly wouldn't go away, not that she looked fat, she didn't. Her belly swelled slightly as if she were in the early stage of pregnancy.

She joined a singles group. Twice a week she and other middle-aged people danced until dawn in a flat brown building at the end of a skinny dirt road. She had stories like those of a careless school girl--nothing to live for but the night, a cool kiss, the touch of a man.



"What do you think?" she would ask me before going out. "How do I look?"

She stood in front of her vanity mirror. She had decorated her room in red antique satin. Sometimes at night men in pickup trucks would drive by and beep at the red glow in the windows. The mirror was framed in lights like a movie star's. From where I lay on her red and gold bedspread, I could see her bottom molded into some silky material that clung.

She wore red lipstick.

"Fine," I would say absently. I always pretended not to notice how beautiful she was. I pretended that I wasn't enamored of her. I looked back down at whatever I was reading. Usually a love story. I was always eager to get to the happy ending.

The last thing she would say to me was, "Are you afraid?"

I would see her standing in the doorway under the porch light, see the way her high heels glittered in the half light. I felt the warm night air. I thought of a rocket I had seen one night walking with my mother along the lime-rock road there in front of the house. The rocket had been like a gigantic fire in the sky and then the fire had broken into two fires, one falling and one rising and then there was only the night sky.

"No, I'm not afraid," I said.

I lied. On the nights she left me alone I couldn't sleep. My mother had given me my father's old room and though she had fixed it up--painted the walls white and bought lilac-flowered curtains and a matching bedspread, a purple throw rug--I couldn't get used to sleeping there.

The old house made strange noises.

I took a pillow and the patchwork quilt she had made for me and slept in the bathtub. The bathtub was deep and white and stood on clawed feet. I pulled the pink shower curtain closed. I thought nobody would look for me there.

\*

Two years after my father died I discovered I was a good lover. My boyfriend came through the unlocked kitchen door. I waited in bed, listening for his footsteps in the hall.

The first time I made love, he and I had been hiking through the woods in the back of the old house. It was a mucky afternoon, hot, still. There would be a rain. When he and I got back to the house, he suggested we take a shower.

"Okay," I said. "My mother won't be back for hours."

I took off my clothes and laid them on the toilet seat. I never minded taking off my clothes. He lathered

soap in his hands and bathed me. I closed my eyes and then I felt him pushing into me, quickly, before I could tell him no. The first thing I thought was how strange it felt, having something inside me.

The nights my mother stayed home I would sneak out my bedroom window and along the side of the house, under her bedroom windows to the lime-rock road. My boyfriend would wait for me near a live oak not far from the house and we would strip and make love in the grass there. In the half dark our bodies would look unfamiliar. They looked like the polished ivory figurines my mother kept on the living room mantle. Other times my boyfriend and I would fight. It could be any boyfriend. I was jealous, I had to be the only one, and sometimes he would leave me with bruises and I would have to lie to my mother, tell her that I had walked into a door or fallen off my bike, that my black eye or the marks on my arms where a man had squeezed me until my bones ached were from a vitamin deficiency. She believed me.

\*

One afternoon the summer I was sixteen I came into my mother's room and found her sitting at her vanity mirror. "Women in our family wrinkle early," she said without looking up at me. "It's the red hair and fair skin."

I didn't know what to say. I was already studying the lines under my eyes, worried about getting old. Not that I was beautiful. I had freckles, like my mother, and blue eyes, but instead of her full breasts and curvy hips, my body seemed stunted in childhood. My breasts were small and funny, the nipples too large for them, and my hips were narrow. When I looked at myself in the mirror it would seem to me that God had thrown silly-putty at a wall. Now I looked at my mother. Her lips were dry and cracked, as though she had been licking them. The skin underneath her eyes was puffy. Had she been crying? I couldn't remember ever seeing her cry.

When she said, "Let's go to Morrison's," I didn't think anything about it except that I wanted to drive.

At Morrison's Cafeteria a man in a white shirt and red jacket carried our trays. He set our plates of overcooked vegetables and fried shrimp in front of us. He poured tea.

I picked up a shrimp with my fingers and dipped it in ketchup. "I'm starving," I said and laughed, feeling happy to be sitting in Morrison's eating dinner, with a slice of chocolate pie for dessert.

She unfolded the cloth napkin. "I'm going to start dialysis." She let the napkin fall over her lap. "My kidneys aren't working too well."

I thought that I had overheard a conversation at another table. A fat man and woman sat with several small children and he was telling them to eat their meat-loaf.

"Do you remember Herb Penney?" I heard my mother ask. "He was on dialysis for a while."

"He died, Mama," I said. He had been a tall man who attended our church, thin except for his hands. When you shook one it was like shaking a bloated toad.

My mother laughed. "That's right." She sighed. "But dialysis has progressed since then. I don't even have to pay for it. The government pays."

I didn't know what to say. It was the first I had heard about my mother's disease.

A pickup truck backed into the parking space in front of the window. A rattlesnake as big around as my upper arm was draped over the tailgate.

"Remember that time we saw Ross Allen milk a rattlesnake?" I asked and felt light-headed, as if I had eaten too much sugar and I hadn't touched the chocolate pie. "Allen had held the snake behind its head and squeezed until poison dripped out of the fangs into a plastic cup." I was conscious of the air-conditioning. "I'm cold," I said and I pushed back my chair.

"I still have to pay," she said.

Out in the parking lot she took the keys. "That's enough of your driving for one day," she said. I had driven off Orange Road three times on the way into town.

I sat in the passenger seat watching the pines and the occasional hawk; buzzards drifted in the dull early evening sky. We passed Hatchet Creek Bridge where my father used to meet his girlfriends on the edge of the rusty-colored creek.

"The poison was white and creamy," I said.

"What?"

"The snake Ross Allen was milking."

"I don't know why you insist on talking about that," she said. "What's the point?"

"The point is," I said, "that you let him put a black snake around your neck and people took pictures of you."

"So?" The car engine idled, died. She stayed leaning against the steering wheel, her hand on the key she'd just turned.

The house loomed white in the dark. I imagined the house on fire. Fire seemed the mortar that held the planks together.

My mother heard it first. "Listen," she said. It sounded like someone walking, the footsteps heavy and deliberate.

An armadillo moved into the beam of the car lights, a tiny armored tank blundering over the lawn. We could hear it rooting up grass, looking for grub worms, things that live in the soil there just below the surface. It was comforting, the sound of the methodical digging. I often heard them outside at night. It was always the same. A quickening of my heart, thinking it was somebody. Then the sound of the rooting, the relief that it was only an armadillo.

My father used to shoot them. He would have my mother shine the flashlight over the yard looking for them. When my father hit an armadillo it would fly up into the air.

My mother took the key out of the ignition and sat back. I looked straight ahead, through the dirty windshield with crushed love bugs stuck to it. The dead bugs smelled like semen.

"My kidneys are covered in cysts," she said and her voice was quiet. "Edith, I'm afraid."

We watched the armadillo. I think now that I must have been in shock and at the same time the surprise seemed inevitable, as though I must have sensed that something was wrong almost from the beginning, in the same way that adopted children are said to know that their parents aren't really their parents, that they are living with people who could have easily remained strangers. The armadillo made

its slow way out of the light and then we could hear it digging nearby.

★

Ernie Smith worked at White's Hardware in town. My mother met him a couple of weeks after she learned that she would undergo dialysis. She went in to buy some nails and ended up falling in love with Ernie. Ernie looked like a mole, he looked like my father, small and dark-eyed. Ernie took her dancing at the Holiday Inn and when they came home I could hear them in the kitchen opening cans of Campbell's soup, Vegetable Beef or Bean with Bacon, my mother's favorites. Usually, though, they just sat on the flowered chintz sofa watching TV.

"He's taking me for a seafood dinner in Cedar Key," my mother said to me. "It's a special occasion," she said and winked.

While she was in her bedroom, standing in her push-up bra and panties, running a hot iron over her lavender dress, the long one with a slit up one leg and matching hot pants, Ernie leaned over the coffee table and put his mouth on mine. I was supposed to be keeping him entertained. His tongue reached far into my mouth.



The next morning the heat woke me. It was the kind of hot languor that comes before a storm. I kicked the sheet off and lay there, listening to the hum of the floor fan. I thought about whether or not I should tell her about Ernie. This sort of thing had happened before and I had never told her. She would invite a man home for dinner or iced tea. She would go into the kitchen to check on something on the stove and the man would come over and put his arms around me, a fatherly sort of hug. "I never liked my father," I would tell them every time. "Buzz off." But some of them wouldn't stop. They would look down my shirt. Once, one of them put his hands on my breasts and said to me, "You'll never be as beautiful as your mother."

I got up and went outside. I had to be careful where I walked on the porch, the boards were soft, starting to sag. Termites, one of my mother's brothers had said. Her brothers rarely came to see her and then only when they were drunk. They talked about the heat of the summer, about the relief they hoped would come with winter even though there was never much relief from the heat in Florida. My mother was always glad when they got up to go, when she saw the thin cotton of their shirts sticking to their backs.

A breeze stirred the green leaves of the camphor trees growing along the edge of the porch. A pickup truck drove

by fast on the lime-rock road raising dust. Dust drifted toward the house, settling over my mother's pink flamingo birdbath.

I closed my eyes and breathed in the smell of the camphor trees.

"You have to understand the difference between right and wrong," my father used to say.

I never could. I never understood that whatever I had done was wrong. I no longer remember why I had to stand for hours, inhaling the smell of the camphor trees I loved just outside the window, wishing I was outside, anywhere but there, my nose pressed against the dark, varnished pine. My legs ached.

The day of my father's funeral someone had brought me a gum-drop tree, a branch stuck in a coffee can filled with dirt, a gift meant to ease a child's pain, I suppose. But I hadn't felt any pain.

"Good morning!" My mother was at her bedroom window, peering through the white sheers.

Outside a fat, black fly buzzed, bounced off the screen.

"I'm getting married!" she said. It was obvious she couldn't believe her luck. "Ernie's asked me to marry him."

I opened the screen door. The hall was wide and cool. I went in the living room where it was dark, the room

sheltered from the sun by the camphor trees, and turned on the television.

A rerun of "The Twilight Zone" was just beginning. An old woman paced the floor of her small room. A young Robert Redford appeared. He seemed so clean and fresh, out of place in the dank surroundings. He knocked on the old woman's door.

"He's really short," my mother said, coming in. She was wearing yellow Bermuda shorts.

"Like Daddy," I said. I could smell coffee brewing. "Does Ernie know?" How could a man desire a woman if he knew that her insides were covered with cysts? "Does Ernie know what?" She sat in the rocker in the corner.

"I found a dead rat under my bed," I said.

"Lovely," my mother said. "One of Sandra Lee's cats must have brought it in." She shook her head, dismayed. Sandra Lee and her mother used to run the store down the road. Now she owned a hundred cats and fed them food scraps in giant aluminum tubs in her back yard.

Robert Redford was lying in the old woman's bed. The old woman was afraid to die. Robert Redford had come to convince her.

My mother went into the hospital to have the veins in her left arm, the largest veins, the veins that carry the blood directly to the heart, tied together to form a shunt. Ernie sent her roses.

"All my life I never thought about my veins except to be glad I didn't have those fat ones on my legs some women are cursed with." My mother shuddered, ruffling the blue chiffon of her nightgown. "Earthworms knotted under the skin. Gives me goose bumps."

On the bedside table were Ernie's twelve red roses. "Get well soon" the card read.

"How original," I said. "You're not exactly what I'd call sick." The stems were limp, as though the buds were a burden to them.

"If they don't open, Ernie says I can return them," she said. "I always figured it was luck, you got good ones or bad ones; if you got the ones that never opened you just threw them in the trash. Maybe it's some kind of promotion."

There was a knock on the door. "I brought you this," her doctor said, coming in. His name was Dr. Tarrel--a kidney specialist. He was young and lean. A marathon runner. He handed her a blue spongy ball, then patted her foot through the bedcovers. "If you use this ball several

times a day, it should help you build up the veins in your arms."

"Do you play with all your patient's feet?" she said, flirting.

"Clients," he said, raising his finger, as if making a point to a child. "I consider kidney failure a condition rather than an illness. Something to live with."

She smiled. She was wearing pale, pink lipstick.

"I need to say some things," he said and looked at me.

"Go ahead," my mother said. "If she didn't hear firsthand, she'd pester me until she found out." She squeezed the ball. "Edith wants to be a journalist."

Doctor Tarrel told my mother that she could die tomorrow--a blood vessel could break--or she could live a long and full life. He explained that she had polycystic kidney disease just like a couple of hundred thousand other Americans and that the cysts were created by a weakness in her veins, veins swelling and sometimes bursting.

She picked up the remote control, and the ball dropped, rolled until it hit the wall. "I'm lucky," she said and aimed the remote. "I can still go to the bathroom a little. Some people can't."

"That's right," he said.

"The Guiding Light" was coming on.

"I'll be around," he said and then he left.

I could hear his footsteps brisk, going away. Cars were going by on the road outside, turning into the shopping mall across the street. I thought of the veins like dams and the blood like rivers flowing through them, and how sometimes dams break.

"Let me tell you about this show," my mother said. "It's a love story. Chris is in love with Samantha but Samantha is lost in the Rocky Mountains. She dreams about him all the time, and then there's Hilda who's trying to put the moves on Chris. It's wonderful!"

"Oh, Mama." I laughed.

"I really believe that your father and I could have made it," she said. A woman selling Cheer! sang and danced under a clothesline. "We were just starting to get along."

Bruises up and down her thighs.

The morning of the day he died he'd gone out of the house singing, of all things, a song about mosquitoes and lily pads, frogs. When he closed the door, the string of tiny gold bells attached to the doorknob swayed, as they always did. It was a happy, tinkling sound.

She leaned over and took her handbag off the bedside table, pulled out a photograph and handed it to me.

It was small and square, a black-and-white photograph that had yellowed. I frowned at the man and woman sitting side by side in two straight chairs. The woman was smiling.

She looked frightened and too thin. He wasn't smiling. They might have been strangers, thrown together by chance, waiting for a train, a bus. My parents on their wedding day.

My father's sleepy eye was half-closed. His eye was damaged at birth, when the doctor accidentally pinched a nerve. His mother died a few hours later. I don't even know her name. It seems as though I must have known her name once, but if so, I can't remember, just as I can't remember a lot of things. I do know that two spinster aunts raised my father. My mother told me they beat him with his own belt and then tied him to the big oak out in front of their house. They left him there whole days.

Walking along the hospital corridor, my mother eyed the arms of men and women with big veins like a jealous lover, the way I looked at the pretty and popular girls who had stolen one or another of my boyfriends. My mother looked at the veins on the inside of her own wrists. They were small and blue.

"The veins are blue because they've given up the oxygen to the body," my mother informed me. "That means the blood is headed back to the heart and lungs to get more oxygen." She smiled. "Doctor Tarrel told me."

A man in a hospital gown scuffled toward us, an intravenous drip jerking beside him. He was gaunt, and to

me he looked like a walking dead man. Half the top of his head was missing.

"I can't smell or taste," he said, pausing. "But I'm alive." He threw his hands up. "Praise the Lord."

My mother nodded and looked at the inside of his wrists.

I nudged her elbow, hurrying her along. "He's nuts," I whispered. "Don't encourage him."

"But did you see those veins!" She stopped and turned to look after him.

"Next thing I know you'll be wanting to date the guy," I said. She laughed. "You'll be wanting to suck his veins."

"Stop, it Edith," she said. "What have I done for you to be so ugly." She tucked my hair behind my ears. "Your hair is sloppy," she said. She wanted me to cut it, to look neat.

"There's nothing wrong with me," I said.

\*

She drove herself to the dialysis center every Tuesday and Thursday.

"We have to do better than this," she said one afternoon when she came home. The dining room table is piled up with mail. "We just can't seem to keep things in



order." She picked up one pile as though she had to arrange everything right then; then she dropped it. "I'll get us some tea."

There were dirty dishes in the kitchen sink, on the counter, the pressure cooker unwashed and sitting on the kitchen floor. "What if Ernie just decided to stop by?"

The refrigerator reeked of something rotten when she opened it to get the tea. "Must be that chicken," I said. I pulled out the culprit, a green and brown carcass carelessly wrapped in tin foil, and dumped it into the already overloaded brown paper sack sitting beside the backdoor. "There!"

"You will never grow up," my mother said and shook her head.

"What do you mean?"

"I'll be back," she said. "I have to get out of these pants." She was wearing lavender pants with a blood stain on one thigh.

In a few minutes came out wearing one of her old evening gowns. The gown was made of satin and chiffon, and had a slit halfway up her thigh. She opened a drawer beside the sink and pulled out a pair of scissors. Then she sat at the kitchen table and cut the gown off just above her knees.

"You're crazy," I said.

"And you have no breasts." She smiled. "I'll get you one of those bust developers I've seen advertised."

"I like having no breasts," I said. "They only get in the way."

"You have no idea," she said.

I wanted to tell her that Daddy liked me best, that sometimes when she wasn't at home he would make me stand naked in front of him, in front of the fireplace. He said it was my punishment for having gotten too close to the fire. "It's dangerous to get too close," he would say.

One day I came in from school ready to watch "The Edge of Night" and found her lying on her back on the grass out in the front yard beside the birdbath. She had been to dialysis and had on that same pair of lavender pants.

A redbird fluttered and perched on the side of the bath. The water was fresh and clean.

My mother said, "Once I found one of the women at Sunnyland sitting on the steps outside the cottage holding a redbird. The poor bird's head was crushed. I said, Billy, put that down and go wash your hands."

"Why don't you wear something else?" I said.

She shrugged. "What difference does it make?"  
I fell on her. I felt my nails sinking in through the cotton, skin. I felt her beating my head with her fists.

But she wasn't strong. She made funny sounds, the kind of sounds someone makes when they're making love and it's good. I didn't stop until I had her pants around her ankles.

"Mama," I said. She had locked herself up in the bathroom just off the back porch. "It's been two hours," I said. "I'm hungry." I could feel the heat from the tilly-heater coming from under and around the door. In the middle of summer.

Then I heard the key moving in the lock and the door opened. "I can't," she said. She stood there in her top and panties, the lavender pants crumpled up in one hand. "Nothing comes."

"Oh God," I said. Her eyes, nose--everything was swollen up.

I couldn't stand to look at her so I looked at my hands. There was blood underneath my fingernails. I looked away, out over the yard. Down back I saw the old outhouse, the lush, green vine that had grown up and over it. The other day my mother took a picture of me standing in front of the outhouse. I was wearing my short, yellow nighty with the satin trim. When I was little and had to go to the bathroom I'd wake my mother. She'd take the flashlight from the night stand and then lead me through the house by the

hand, out the back door, over the dark, wet grass. She'd stand outside shining the flashlight through the crack in the door so I could see. Inside the outhouse were two holes cut into a plank. The holes were infested with white worms.

\*

Now and then, usually on the weekend, I drove her to the dialysis center. Now that her kidneys had stopped working entirely, my mother had to be dialyzed not two but three times a week--Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday. When I drove her, I shopped in the mall across the street. Then I came back to watch her being dialyzed and read magazines in the waiting room.

My mother and the other clients sat in green vinyl recliners, the same color as chameleons that lived in the windows of the old house. The row she was in faced the windows, the other faced the wall. Behind each chair was the tiniest television I had ever seen, attached to a folding arm. Beside each chair was a machine with tubes sticking out of its head. The only sound the machine made was a shrill whistle whenever something went wrong.

I sat on a black stool.

"Look," she said, pointing at an oblong plastic tube.  
"This is my kidney."

I looked at the tube, filled for the moment with her blood.

"Who's he?" I said, looking past the tube, to a young man at the end of the row against the windows.

"Too old for you. He had a transplant, but his body rejected it." She said, "He's divorced with two children."

A nurse came by, touched one of my mother's feet, asked if she was okay. All the nurses at the dialysis center were pretty, if not beautiful, with a healthy bounce to their walk. And blond. Their blond hair fell in easy waves, or straight down, past their shoulders. At noon they all took turns jogging, running over the green hills that surrounded the center, through the woods. They talked with my mother about men, men they wanted to marry, to have and to hold until death. My mother smiled at the nurse and settled a little farther down into her chair, under the cream-colored afghan that Myrtle, a blind black woman three chairs down, had made for her.

"She has incredible eyelashes," I said. I thought the nurse was the kind of woman my mother would have liked for a daughter. "I'd bet anything they're false," I said. But my mother had her TV earplugs in.

\*

"Can't make it," my latest boyfriend said. I felt myself panicking. "Gotta go," he said.

Some girls at school had seen him standing under the trees in the cemetery outside First Baptist last Sunday talking to a new girl with long black hair. "I only wanted you for your body anyway," I told him but he had already hung up.

I went into the kitchen looking for something to eat and found an unopened package of fudge cookies on the counter. My mother had bought them for herself but I tore them open anyway. Before I knew it the bag was empty.

I decided to call the man I had seen at the dialysis center. My mother had a list of numbers for the people on dialysis. His number was easy to find--she had written the word transplant in big letters by his name. Sal Carlyle.

"I'm Edith Snowdon," I said. "You know my mother, Laverne Snowdon. She's on dialysis too."

"Yes. She's that lady with the pantsuits and scarves. She's nice."

Sal came over and drank iced tea. "Where's Laverne?" he asked.

"She went to see her boyfriend, I think." She wouldn't tell me.

When it started getting late, I took Sal's hand and led him to my bedroom.

"What about your mother?"

"She never comes back earlier than midnight," I said. I took off my clothes, a white cotton sun dress, and lay on the bed.

"You're so tan," he said. "You look so healthy."

"I'm not," I said. I put my hands on my belly and it was as if I could feel my insides crowded with cysts. It felt as if my belly might explode though it looked flat.

His body was long and bony. White. It reminded me of photographs I had seen of victims of the Holocaust. Unbelievable. I touched the scar. It traveled from his belly around to his back. I could see the tracks where the stitches had been.

"What's it like," I said, "having a part of you cut out?"

"It's a relief," he said, "when you know it's the part that's killing you."

The place on his left arm where the dialysis needle had been inserted was black and blue and swollen. He said, "Come here."

I could hear the chimney swifts moving in the boarded-up fireplace in my bedroom. If my mother knew they were nesting there she would tear the plywood down and remove

the baby swifts and wrap them in an old sheet and leave them to die in the trash.

\*

It was after midnight when my mother got home.

"I was afraid you'd turned into a pumpkin," I said, opening the front door.

She stood on the porch, her arms limp at her side.

"He's found someone else, someone younger. A nurse."

I thought of the pink satin wedding gown hanging in the closet. Pressed, perfect. She had made it herself.

"He dyes his hair, Mama, you can see it on his forehead, little dribbles."

She stepped into the hallway. "I need a drink."

"A drink?" There had never been any alcohol in our house, not that I knew of anyway. I followed her into the kitchen.

"You'll find a bottle in the back of the cabinet under the sink." She sat at the table and kicked off her grasshoppers.

I walked over to the sink and stooped to open the cabinet. I was sore from fucking. Behind the Comet and bleach, the Dove dish soap, I found a bottle of blackberry wine.



Rain started falling, softly at first, then rat-a-tat-tat over the tin roof.

"Ernie looks like a mole," I said and put two glasses on the table. "He's ugly."

"Lightning." She looked past me out the window.

Under the pecan tree was a ball of lightning. I had never seen anything like it and watched it turn around itself and then go into the ground or the tree. I poured the wine. The color reminded me of the grape juice they used to drink at church for communion. My father wouldn't let me drink the juice because I had not been saved.

I got up and opened the screen door. I walked down the steps, under the pecan tree. I listened to the rain falling all around me. Thunder rolled. I heard the screen door open and close. My mother stood beside me. "Fuck God," she said and laughed. She had the wine bottle in one hand. Her hair was wet and sticking to her head, down the back of her neck.

\*

"This is insane," I said. If a man doesn't want you, then there is nothing you can do about it. She pulled the Valiant up over the side of the road and turned off the car and we sat there in the dark.

"Well, somebody's there," she said. We could see a light-colored car in the driveway.

"Ernie is just like daddy," I said. "Daddy couldn't keep his penis in his pants."

"Edith," she said and then, "You can stay here if you want to."

She opened her door and got out, pressed her bottom slowly against the door until it closed with a click and then strode up the driveway. After a long moment I got out too. I had to run to catch up.

She walked up the steps and knocked on the front door. There was the sound of feet moving over the raised wood floor. Then the porch light came on and the door opened. My mother stood there in the light looking through the screen at the woman on the other side.

"I'm looking for Ernie Smith."

"Ernie?" the woman said and turned. Her hair was in pink-sponge rollers.

"What the hell?" Ernie said when he saw my mother.

"He's already sweating," I said.

"Why did you do it, Ernie?" my mother said.

Ernie looked at her, shook his head. He put his arm around the woman.

"She's a hog, Mama, who cares? Let's go."

But my mother wasn't moving. She just kept standing there in the light. Mosquitoes buzzed. Bugs hit at the light. Some of them sizzled, dropped. A black beetle spun on its back at her feet, trying to flip itself back upright.

"If I had a gun I would blow your brains out," I said to Ernie.

"Edith, please," my mother said. "She's got the black-ass today."

"He's nobody," I said. "Come on."

Back at home she changed into her nightgown and lay on her stomach on her bed. The bedspread was turned back. The night was sticky.

"Sleep with me," she said. "I get so tired of an empty bed."

I noticed the hairs on her legs were long and asked if she wanted me to shave them. It was something I did for her sometimes, shaved her legs, or I might pluck her eyebrows, or give her a facial. I ran the electric razor over her legs and then rubbed cream into them. She smiled, the side of her face pushed into the pillow, her arms bent underneath.

"Your skin is so white," I said.

"I'm all belly and breasts." She laughed. "It feels good."

When I had finished, she sat up. She flattened her hands up and down her legs. She seemed pleased. Her hands glided over her silky, salmon-colored nightgown, over her breasts, belly. I had only ever seen her body like this, hidden underneath some material. I thought it was strange that the body I came from should be such a mystery.

She stood. "I'll be back in a minute."

She went out and I heard her footsteps in the hall, in the dining room, and then on the stairs. I heard her overhead and after listening a long moment realized that she must be in the junk room.

"What is it?" I said. She was carrying a cardboard box.

"I was thinking about Mama." She put the box on the bed and started taking out photographs. "Here she is," she said and handed me a small oval picture. I had seen the photograph before. The woman in the photograph has serene eyes and her hair is smoothed back. She looks straight into the camera as if she could do anything she set her mind to, as if she is afraid of nothing. "Here she is again, I can't believe it." I have also seen this photograph before. My grandmother's eyes are wild; her hair is tangled. There is a child on her lap, a child with his hand fastened on her

arm, several children crowded behind her. I recognize my mother, almost grown, standing to one side. The eyes of the two women look to be suspicious of the lens that has found them.

My mother told me about the night her mother died. She had told me before, trying I think to understand why her mother died, what was wrong with her mother that made her bleed and not be able to stop bleeding. Her parent's bedroom door was ajar and from the hall my mother could see her mother's bare leg. A car rattled up and the doctor came into the house. The next morning her mother was dead.

"She died when I was sixteen," my mother said to me. "I still miss her."

During the night I felt my mother's foot touching my calf. I was sleeping on the far side of the bed, my back turned. I propped up on one elbow and looked at her twisted in the sheets. It felt wrong sleeping in her bed, vaguely sexual, and I promised myself that I wouldn't let this happen again. I would sleep in my own bed. I dozed and slept. I dreamed of a woman with enormous breasts sucking my breasts and I felt the twinge of desire.

The next morning my mother said, "I dreamed that I was urinating."

"Corn flakes?" I wasn't about to tell her my dream.

She nodded, and her eyes had hope. "Miracles happen," she said.

\*

"He died right there, just inside his door," my mother said. "Sal Carlyle was closing his door behind him when the place where they put the needle in broke open."

It only takes a few minutes to bleed to death.

"What were we doing at that time?" She frowned at me.

"Where were we?"

"What do you want to watch?" I said. I thought I might vomit.

"'Magnum.'"

She sat on the couch, pulled the brown robe that once belonged to my father up around her. The cuffs were frayed, the bottom torn where she kept catching her foot in the hem.

I switched on the television and there was Magnum, moving across the screen and wearing a pair of white shorts. His legs were tan and muscular and hairy.

He was the only man in both our lives now.

"I didn't know him all that well. His chair was at the other end of the room." She shivered and looked up at the open window. A breeze moved the sheers. "His children were

visiting their mother. They might have saved him. But then, maybe not. Maybe they would have had to see him bleed to death." She held up Myrtle's afghan. "Would you lay this over me? I don't know why but I'm cold."

I got up, unfolded the afghan, and draped her.

Magnum had been hired to protect a jazz singer. Someone was trying to kill her but she said she had no idea who or why.

"She knows," my mother said.

I heard the crinkle of a plastic sack, saw her pop a forbidden chocolate in her mouth.

"What kind?" I said.

"What kind what?"

"You think I don't know?"

Lately she had started keeping sacks of candy between the cushions of the couch, in the corners of closets, the backs of cupboards. She never weighed her food. She didn't do anything she was supposed to do. I found the blue spongy ball under her bed covered in dust and white hairs.

\*

It happened like this. One day the veins that had been so carefully joined to form a natural shunt closed. The blood refused to come. She would have to have a plastic

shunt inserted into her arm, to create a place strong enough to support the dialysis needle.

"What about a transplant?" I asked.

"Impossible," Doctor Tarrel said.

I felt a rush of relief, against my will.

"Your mother waited too long to come to me. Her heart was already enlarged from the extra work it had to do, what with her blood being dirty. You know that just before she came to me a little bubble went through her heart."

I hadn't known. I thought there must be a lot of things I didn't know, things she never told me.

\*

"That's not Ernie's car out there." I opened the screen door.

My mother turned. "I thought you were shopping." She was making biscuits. Her hands were covered with flour.

"Your lipstick," I said. She was wearing a dusky rose color.

Ernie came clomping in. I remembered one of his legs was shorter than the other. He was holding a hammer and a lock. He looked the same except instead of combing his few hairs left to right he had combed them back to front. My



mother looked older, her hair was grey, her face was loose from the constant retaining and letting go of fluids.

"Your mother offered to cook me one of her good home-cooked meals," he said, "if I'd put a new lock on the front door."

"What's wrong with the old one?" I asked.

He stuck out his hand. I stared at his lips. His lips were thin, and he had a cold sore at the corner of his mouth. It looked like he had been picking at it. I walked up to him, put my mouth on his, pushed my tongue into his mouth, the same way he had forced his tongue in mine. He put his hands on my shoulders and I thought he was going to pull me to him. Then I heard my mother shouting something and he pushed me away.

"Maybe he would be a good candidate for a transplant," I said. He looked at me, as though he was disgusted. I was so close that I could see the cataracts clouding his dark eyes. "Let's cut him open and see."

"What right!" I heard my mother say and then I felt the blow on my shoulder. The rolling pin hit the floor and kept on rolling. It rolled over the kitchen floor, into the dining room. It rolled and rolled and then it stopped.

I walked out and got in the car and she didn't come after me. I sat there a minute. I didn't know where to go so I just started driving. An hour or so later I saw a sign

for Devil's Hole. I had never been there before but some of the kids at school talked about it. People came here to drink, to do drugs. The water was smooth and black, deep, endless. On the ground at the edge of the water lay a brown paper sack, a crushed beer can, a pair of black lacy panties. When people drowned in Devil's Hole they were never found. They sank into the crevices to underground streams that flowed into the ocean or the Gulf or who knew where.

I took off my skirt and T-shirt and panties and squatted, sliding down the grassy bank into the water. I swam toward the middle. My father had taught me to swim. Out at Swan Lake he made me jump off the dock. He said he would be there to catch me but he wasn't and it was all part of his plan. I had to swim or drown. I heard crickets. A bullfrog croaked. I felt strong and good and clean.

The lock Ernie had installed was shiny and gold.

When I pushed on the front door it swayed open soundlessly. As I stepped inside I saw Ernie coming out of my mother's bedroom door.

"She has cysts on her kidneys," I said. "Did she tell you? One on top of the other, like seashells at the beach stacked up for sale."

He stood there startled, trying to buckle his belt without looking at what his hands were doing.

"What about you?" my mother said. She was wearing her Chinese robe, the one with cranes embroidered on the back.

"What do you mean?"

"It hasn't occurred to you?" she asked. "Ernie, I thought Edith was so smart. She always made A's. Her father made sure of that. Then when he died she started failing."

"Good-bye Ernie," I said. I knew that I sounded like a jealous lover but I couldn't stop. Ernie hesitated. "God damn it, get out or I'll pop your eyes out of your ugly head." I stuck my thumbs up so that he could see I meant business.

"Ernie," my mother said. "This is my house."

"I'll see you, Laverne," he said to my mother. The screen door opened and closed.

"Sometimes I wish I were dead," my mother said.

\*

They hacked open her chest with a saw, that's what they used, to get through the bone.

"She's going to look bad when she comes out," the social worker warned me. "There are going to be tubes and everything, she's going to be very pale. It's normal."

I lay in the waiting room. Rain beat against the picture windows. My mother lay on a table in an operating room on the other side of two big metal doors. After several hours, the surgeon came out.

"Everything's fine," he said. He was a famous man. "It went well." Blood was on his white coat.

My mother didn't wake up. Days passed. A week.

On the television they talked about a hurricane. They showed pictures of mobile homes turned upside down, crushed like so many tin cans, uprooted oaks, roofs of houses spun off.

Ernie didn't come by.

I lowered the bedrail, climbed into bed beside her, and broke my promise to myself that I wouldn't sleep with her. There was so much room.

After thirteen days, she opened her eyes. She could no longer talk. She couldn't move one side of her body.

"We can't even tell you if she knows you or not; her whole personality could be different," Doctor Tarrel said. They brought in a speech therapist.

They brought in a physical therapist to massage her paralyzed leg and arm.

I bent over to try to understand what she was saying. "I live," she said.

She reached up and touched my hair. I had gotten the scissors out of her bedroom, the ones she used to chop off her evening gowns, glittery, like snake skins hanging in the closet, and sitting at her vanity mirror I had cut my hair short all over, the way she used to cut it when I was a child, the way she wanted me to wear it. She grinned.

"I feel lighter," I said and she nodded, as if she understood.

\*

"The doctor said if you have another operation you'll probably die on the operating table," I said.

Her shunt had clogged up again, and they would have to operate, this time to join the veins in her right arm. Her blood was dirty. Even with dialysis it was impossible to keep it clean.

She looked up. She looked like a child, frightened, and tired. I sat on the edge of the bed and held her hands. I looked down at her hands in mine.

I said, "It's up to you." I had practiced this. I spoke fast. I said, "He wanted me to ask you. He said you don't have to have the operation if you don't want to. But if you don't you'll never be dialyzed again."

When I looked up I saw her tears. Then suddenly my mother was laughing and crying at the same time and then both of us were laughing like two crazy women and crying.

"Yes," my mother said, "yes yes yes."

A medical van carried her home; the inside of the van was slippery looking and white. At the house, two orderlies hoisted her between them and heaved her onto a rented hospital bed in my room at back of the house, where it was quieter.

"I feel so sick," I said and hurried to the bathroom. On my knees in front of the toilet I vomited and vomited.

"Nerves," I heard someone say and I looked up. One of the orderlies stood in the bathroom doorway. His silhouette reminded me of a beggar who had come to the house when I was a child. It had surprised my mother to see him, a tall thin man standing at the unlatched front door. "I'm hungry," he had said but my mother, out of fear, sent him away. As he walked out the gate and then along the lime-rock road I had thought of angels, of Bible stories about angels disguised as beggars.

The orderly laughed and it seemed odd to me that he would. Then I realized that bringing people home to die was an everyday occurrence for him. "Thank you," I said and wondered if he expected a tip. "We'll be fine."

At night I slept on the floor at the foot of my mother's bed.

For the first few days she drank a little of the water I brought her. She ate a mouthful of stew and a bite of biscuit. Then one day she slapped the glass of water out of my hand.

One night I dreamed of a man. I saw the ugliness inside me. I dreamed of my insides covered with cysts. How could a man ever desire me? His hands were big. He reached inside me, took out one of my kidneys and held it up for me to look at. It was red and precious as a ruby.

The next morning I said to my mother, "You don't have to do this."

She picked at a thread on the blanket. She seemed angry and far away.

I went to the vase of flowers on the bedside table and start pulling out the irises and jonquils that had started drying up. I tossed the dead flowers in the trash can and then rearranged the hardier roses and mums.

Every morning a hospice nurse, a doughy, kind woman, came to help me. I ran warm water into a plastic bowl and she helped roll my mother gently onto her side. I dried my mother, using a clean towel. Her body was still a mystery.

One day after her bath, after the nurse had gone, I decided fix my mother up. I powdered her nose. I colored her cheeks, her lips. I took a tissue out of my shirt pocket and pressed it to her mouth.

"Oh, Mama," I said. "You are so beautiful." It was the first time I remember saying that to her. "You are beautiful," I said. I smoothed her hair, just as she had done mine when I was a girl, sleeping in her bed, before it occurred to me that other girls didn't sleep with their mothers, when I still thought that she belonged to me.

I suppose that I thought things would go on forever like this. What if miracles really did happen? What if her kidneys were free of cysts and she didn't need to be dialyzed anymore? People went to Lourdes, France, and were healed simply by believing. Maybe her belief in miracles would be enough.

It wasn't.

Her breathing grew labored, her chest heaved, rattled. Her lungs were filling with fluid. She was drowning and drifting, drifting, like a tired lover, a lover who is no longer in love. I thought of swimming, of how my mother never learned to swim, she had always required a raft, or water wings, something to keep her afloat. I lay on the floor at the foot of her bed listening to her trying to breathe.



Angels disguised as beggars.

I dreamed or I remembered.

A wild kitten got caught in the chicken coop out back. The coop had been empty for months, years maybe, but my father left it in a corner of the backyard, the door broken, hanging on by a screw.

"We have to catch it," my father said. He studied the kitten. "Go in and get my gloves."

I looked at the kitten, clinging to the wire, its small white chest heaving. "What are you going to do with it?"

"I can't wait forever," he said. He stuck his arm through the door of the coop. I watched his bare hand close over the kitten. The kitten yowled and my father jerked back.

"Go get my gun," he said, sucking his bloody hand, "and ask your mother where the bullets are."

"I won't," I said. I ran into the house, shut myself up in the bedroom that I still shared with my mother.

In a few minutes I heard the backdoor slam and I went to the window. My mother had the gun and shells. She was wearing a pink cotton dress, the waist tight, the skirt long, flowing. "No," I shouted but no there was no sound.

There was only my mother walking through the uncut grass,  
the grass still damp from the night, going to him.

## EXPOSURE

We cannot see well. My husband Samuel and I are standing on the edge of a cliff after dark on the west coast of France. Samuel takes my hand and pulls me close but I can still feel the space between us. "I love you, Ella," I hear him say but I don't believe it. On the beach people move like ghosts through the falling dark.

Since our baby died three months ago Samuel and I have been living like children, eating rocky road ice cream for dinner or apple pie fresh from the bakery. We stay up watching old Hitchcock films and late-night talk shows. We feel sleepy, but we don't sleep until we have to, and then, more often than not, we don't sleep together, not if I can help it. Now, we have come here, to the Bay of Biscay on the west coast of France, a small cove surrounded by rocks and soft sand. It's a place neither of us has been before, a place meant to help us forget that our baby is dead.

A light flashes in the darkness below us. I see a man and a woman. A child is in the man's arms. Another child stands between them. They are all naked. I look for the person taking the photograph, but I see in another flash

there is nobody. A tripod has been set up and they are taking photographs of themselves--a family, naked, knee-deep in the sea in the dark.

"Isn't it wonderful," I say.

"You must be tired after the long drive," Samuel says to me and takes my hand.

"The water must be really cold here."

"We ought to be going to bed." He leads me back up the path towards the hotel. "Careful," he says. Before, on the way down to the cliff, I almost fell when my foot caught on a rock so smooth, so much the color of the sand that I did not see it.

When we pick up our key at the desk, a white rabbit is sitting in a cage on the counter and sticking its pink nose through the silver bars. The rabbit reminds me of a man with white hair and red glasses who hosts one of those late-night television shows. He is always asking his guests if they are afraid to die. All of them say no. One of them says, "Death doesn't exist!" Another says, "My music will live after me." All of his guests are famous and rich. Sometimes it seems they really do live forever. One day you hear they have died and the next thing you know there they are laughing in your living room.

The bed covers have been turned back over a red and gold paisley spread. I go into the bathroom and open my makeup bag. I rub cream on my face and wipe it off. I press a wet cotton pad to my eyes. I slip off my sun-dress and leave it on the floor. I look at the empty tub, at the white enamel, the slippery curve of its back, and then I climb in. When I was growing up I used to hide in the tub and my mother pretended that she couldn't find me. The white enamel is cold and turns my skin to goose flesh.

"What are you doing in there?" Samuel says and taps on the door.

"I've decided to sleep in here," I say. I put a hand on my belly and I feel like nothing, a slender nothing with breasts. I feel my lower belly, the flesh there soft and sinking.

He opens the door and stands looking big over me and then sighs. I imagine he thought that it would be easier here, an ocean's distance from where we live. He tells me that he needs me and that I am all he has but this isn't true. He has his mother and his brother. His mother tells me that I should not feel too bad about having lost such a young baby, that the real attachment to a child occurs later, but I know that she is wrong. She doesn't know anything.

The next morning Samuel comes into the bathroom and pees as if I am not there in the bathtub. He washes his face and I can see his long back bent over the low sink and then his face blurry in the old mirror as though he is caught in a rain on the other side of a closed window and I feel as though he is not my husband, as though I haven't known him for all these years.

"Ella, sweetie," he says. "I'm going for a swim."

He leans over and kisses my forehead, smooths my hair back off my face and I feign sleep. I hear him leave, hear the door close. I wait until the sound of his footsteps is gone before I get up and go to the bedroom window where I can see him walk along the rocky path. His white shirt flutters and then he disappears down the steps that descend to the sea.

After coffee and toast I take the same path to the edge of the cliff. I hesitate, looking for Samuel, but the beach is crowded with people lying under umbrellas or playing paddle ball. Voices hum, the sound like that of a rail just before the train arrives. Many of the women are wearing only bathing-suit bottoms and though I have heard this is the fashion in France, it surprises me. Samuel must be loving this, I think.

"It's clouding up," I hear someone say and I turn. A dark-haired man is sitting on a bench. "Rain," he says but there is only blue sky. He has a French accent. "Could you tell me what time it is?" he asks.

I look at my watch. "Half past," I say.

The young man nods and smiles. "You aren't French," he says. "No French woman would wear tennis shoes. Only an English woman or an American."

"I'm American," I say. "And what's wrong with tennis shoes?"

"Oh, I like them very much," he says. "But you know French women, they would rather be glamorous with sore feet than comfortable and how do you say? dowdy?"

"I am not dowdy," I say.

"No," he says. "You are beautiful."

"I'm looking for my husband," I say.

"Yes, it is often the case," he says.

"You don't understand."

"This is also often true."

"I don't even know you and I am having a conversation with you," I say and turn to head back up the path, to the hotel.

"Let me buy you a drink", he says catching up. "My stupidity has offended you."

He is so handsome, so foreign to me that I don't resist. We go to the hotel restaurant and have tall red drinks. He tells me that his name is Dominique. He is someone who travels a lot. Speaking in careful English, he tells me about a trip he took around the United States. He traveled from California, across the desert, down to the South where he found people with stronger accents than his own. He says, "I have seen Florida. Everyone spoke Spanish. I could understand nothing!"

I remember something I heard on late night TV. An actor said if you ask almost any French person who his favorite actress is, he will say Romy Schneider, even though she's been dead for years. Some people think she died of grief after her only son impaled himself on a wrought-iron fence. I think that I should ask Dominique about this but when I open my mouth I hear myself saying that my baby is dead. I hear myself say that my husband doesn't like my talking about it. "My baby was in his crib, you see, he was crying," I say. "Just after midnight I called the hospital and told the doctor that my baby had a fever. 'Crush some aspirin up,' the doctor said. 'Give him a few sips of water.'" "I did what the doctor told me to do, but my baby wouldn't stop crying."

"Don't," Dominique says and I can feel his arms around me. "Let's go somewhere," he says. "I have an idea."



We walk to his car and then drive along the coast until we reach the Grande Cote where there are no lifeguards and where the beach is wide and people only swim without clothes and at their own risk.

"Get undressed," he says, unbuttoning his shirt.

"That's okay," I say.

He shrugs and then takes off his trousers, his undershorts. I see him standing naked in front of me, his penis is long and soft.

I walk with him to where the waves hit the sand, the waves that make so much noise as they crest and fall that we cannot hear the voices of the other people on the beach. It's like a dream and I am not like myself, and this I think is why Samuel wanted to bring me to a place we had never been to before, so that I would see differently, so that I would be different.

Dominique dips the waves and dives into the white water. When he comes to stand beside me again dripping with the waves he has swum through his skin is so cold that it has a blue tint. "You should come in," he says. I look up and down the beach. There are some people but they are far enough away now that they don't seem like people but like figurines. I take off my dress pulling it over my head and then my bra and panties and with each piece of clothing I feel laid open, I feel embarrassed for the scar on my belly

and for my breasts still sagging with the milk they once carried but then Dominique touches my scar and smiles and says that I take his breath away.

"I've never felt anything like this," I say and lean back into the water to wet my hair. When I come up, Dominique is standing in front of me and then he pulls me to him. Our bodies are sleek underwater and while I can feel his penis hard even in the cold water, hard against my thigh, he does not enter me though I would not resist and I wonder how it is that the lovers who spend only a short time with us are the ones that we will later yearn for the most, the ones that we seem to know better than we know our husbands or wives with whom we spend a lifetime sleeping.

Samuel is sitting by the window with a book in his lap when I come into the hotel room. "Your hair is wet," he says.

"I went for a swim."

"Who is he?"

"Who?"

"The man who drove you up to the hotel," Samuel says and closes the book. "I was in the restaurant downstairs waiting for you and worried sick about you and then I saw you pull into the parking lot."

"He's a boy who wanted to take me for a drive," I say and I think of Isadora Duncan who died after a young man asked her to go for a ride in his sportscar. It was some years after her two children drowned in the Seine, trapped in the back of a limousine. When he started the engine the scarf she was wearing caught in the spokes of the back tire and snapped her neck.

"I would have killed him if he had stayed," Samuel says. "The chicken shit."

"I'm starved," I say.

Samuel gets on the phone and orders dinner, fish with mushrooms and strawberry tarts, a bottle of wine and another of champagne. The cold of the water seems to have penetrated my skin so even after we have eaten and finished the last of the champagne my skin is still chilly and I am weak with desire for Dominique who must be well on his way to Paris where he will catch a plane to Italy. I put on my nightgown, it is short and made of creamy silk, and lay down on the bed. "I didn't do anything I shouldn't have done," I say.

"I need you Ella," Samuel says and sits beside me, the bed slumping under his weight. "There is nothing I can do about it." He gathers the silk of my nightgown into his fists and I think how he and I will make love tonight and countless nights after and how we may always be strangers

to each other. I think how we may have other children but that I will never forget this one who died, even though I cannot bear to say his name.

## THE BEST YOU CAN DO

She listens to an old woman.

"I don't know what's happening!" the old woman says, and paces in her green plaid slippers. "Herbert just started walking around in a daze and running into walls."

Herbert, the old woman's poodle, sits on the floor between a buffet and a round oak table. He pants. Saliva drips from his smiling mouth and his eyes are dull.

"When this happens to Herbert again try to hold him, love him, calm him down," she says to the old woman. "It's the best you can do until it's over."

"But he won't be still."

"You have to try."

★

The night is coming to an end. The sky is like pink glass.

"Stars," she says, looking up. The man she is with opens her door, then goes around to the driver's side.

He leans over and fumbles in the glove box. "What are you looking for?" she says. He holds up a pink, satin sash.

"Please," he says.

She thinks of the pink satin waistband of a dress she had as a child. Her mother had made the dress for her-- white, crinkly, a full skirt. I can say no, she thinks. She thinks she can get out of the car and run. She lets him tie the satin ribbon around her eyes. She lets him tie her hands behind her back. A precaution, he tells her.

He drives along the hard road for a while, then turns off. The car bounces over potholes, washboard ruts. He drives fast. She sits quietly. Her body is warm. Something slaps the windshield. Spanish moss, she thinks. The car fish-tails.

"We're here," he says.

She lets him lead her, his arm around her shoulders-- first through soft sand and then onto firmer ground, her footsteps softened by leaves, she thinks, yes, leaves. The passage is narrow. Brush scratches her arms, legs, catches the hem of her dress.

"You're going to climb up now," he says. His arm drops from her shoulders. He unties her hands.

A hoot owl hoots, flies off with heavy wings. "I'm right here," he says. He guides her foot to the first step.

She can feel him close to her, his hands fiddling with the knot in the satin sash. Even after the blindfold falls she keeps her eyes closed for a moment. Then she opens them. It's a tree house, roofless unless you count the leaves and the sky.

"I don't understand," she says.

"You don't have to." He kisses her. He's hard, pressing against her. "I wanted to know if you trusted me," he says. "I had to know." He holds her. She feels safe now and a little dreamy. "...try to hold him, love him and calm him down," she says to herself. "It's the best you can do until it's over." She doesn't know how long it takes but she falls asleep.

\*

Someone has a knife and is tracing her nipples, her belly button, the soft insides of her thighs. "I'm a hunter," he says but she doesn't recognize the voice. It could be anybody's. He says, "I killed a doe not long ago. I cut her open and when I did, water and blood came pouring out and then I saw the fawn inside her like a pecan wedged inside its shell."

"...try to hold him, love him and calm him down," she says to herself. "It's the best you can do."

She feels the knife poking her in the side and thinks what a dull knife and then she's half awake.

\*

Her father understands at least one thing--that whatever is perfect doesn't die.

\*

"I'm not hungry, but thank you," she says.

She bends, taking off her stockings. A wave hisses over the hot sand. Over the water she sees her father sitting in a black carriage. Her father is a little boy, holding the reins. "...nobody is there to hold him, or to love him," she thinks. The black horse prances. Her father is dressed in perfectly pressed trousers and his hair is parted unevenly.

\*

She walks along with her arm hooked in the bent arm of a faceless man. Before long they come to a barn. A skinned lamb drags itself out of the barn door. Nubs for legs. Eyes sunken into pale skin slick with blood. How can it live



like this? It has been skinned alive. She wants to hold the lamb. It's the best she can do. But water rushes over the concrete floor and the lamb and the faceless man disappear.

\*

Silvery darkness. A streak of light from the city stretches over the linoleum floor. She lives alone in a room on the second floor in a city where nobody will miss her if she doesn't wake up. She lies in bed and looks at the light coming through the frosted glass and knows that outside it is cold. She remembers how her father tells her with his eyes that she isn't beautiful, isn't the apple of his eye though she has his eyes, bird-like and so dark that they are black.

\*

A house is on fire. She stands close to the blaze, as if daring, inviting the flames to catch the lacy bottom of her nightgown. Inside the house are years and years of things, screaming as if alive.

A hand holds hers but when she looks nobody is there. Men who happen by walk into the flames and out again carrying a piano, a claw-foot bathtub, the toilet. Fire

seems a mortar that holds the upright planks of the house together and then the planks fall one by one.

\*

Sometime in the early morning she is awakened by footsteps on the stairs. Someone knocks but when she gets up and opens the door the hall is empty. She closes the door and returns to bed. She pulls the covers up around her.

Then the knocking starts again. The knocks are steady, relentless as a heartbeat. Then they stop.

\*

"I want you." He unbuttons her shirt, undresses her.

"Wait," she says.

She stands beside the bed feeling the sun on her back, her bottom, and watches him undress. She has never seen him naked. This amazes her now because it seems as though she knows every part of his body--the scattering of freckles on his belly, his chest and arms, his legs. The muscular arms, muscular maybe from lifting animals, cows, horses, or maybe from chopping wood. The purled muscles of his belly. On the inside of one thigh she notices a scar. It looks as though

someone once opened him up with a knife. This scar, pale and the skin soft as a child's, is what she presses her mouth against.

## BABY-DOG

It's been two months since Baby-Dog died. Anita had him cremated, and whenever any of us visit she opens the urn to show us his ashes. My husband thinks Anita is weird as hell, but I understand her. Baby-Dog was the closest thing Anita had to a child.

Anita and I sit on her front porch, she in her swing, the metal chain creaking, and me in one of her rocking chairs. We can't even see the road for the azaleas which are in full bloom.

"There's a snake," I tell Anita.

"Where?" she says.

"In the azaleas." A glass snake slides through the blooms and over spindly branches. Its translucent skin is like a prism in the sunlight.

Anita squints. "I can't see it," she says, shaking her head. She rubs her eyes which are blue and tremulous under thick lenses.

I have never seen a glass snake except in pictures. I have read in the encyclopedia that a glass snake's body can

break apart and then regenerate. Whole sections of its tail can be left behind and the snake will keep on living.

Most afternoons when I get home from my job as a secretary at Martin's Insurance in Hawthorne, and before my husband comes in from work, I visit Anita. I have tried not to miss a day. Loneliness can kill a person. Anita's husband left her forty years ago because Anita couldn't have children. I am all she has in the world now that Baby-Dog is gone.

Our houses are separated by Anita's pecan grove, which she tends herself. She is small and has muscled ridges in her arms and wears cotton dresses summer and winter. Summers her legs are bare. Winters she rolls thick stockings up over her thighs. Every autumn I see her mornings and afternoons bent over, her brown arms stretching for the nuts among the dry leaves.

The glass snake has stopped moving. It has tiny black eyes and a prim sort of mouth. I think it might be playing dead, or maybe just resting. Anita has given up looking for the snake. Or maybe she thinks I'm seeing things.

"How about an iced tea?" she asks me.

I follow Anita into the house and along the hall. Through an open door I see her guest room, double beds covered in white cotton spreads, the afternoon sun streaking them yellow. The kitchen is at the back of the

house. "Sit there," she tells me, pointing at the drop-leaf table pushed against the wall under the windows. Outside, bluejays light on a feeder that Anita put together herself, a piece of plywood nailed to a four-by-four.

She runs water into the kettle and puts it on the stove. "Did you hear about the plane that crashed over at the airport?" she asks. Until she retired, Anita worked at the airport bar in Palatka. People fly single-engine planes there. Sometimes they come in for a landing just over the roofs of the houses. You wonder what would happen if one fell. You imagine the houses split open. Then the plane disappears over the trees, and all you can see is sky.

"I heard about it," I say. A woman and her husband went down in a storm in a nearby cow pasture. The woman was thrown from the plane. Neither survived.

My husband tells me that all of Anita's stories are about dead people or flying. "I wish you would stay away from the old woman," he says. "Think about something cheerful."

I can't seem to.

The tea kettle whistles and Anita opens the freezer and takes out an ice tray. I look out the kitchen window and see my neighbor Mrs. Sherouse's grandchildren beyond the chainlink fence. They are running through a sprinkler and screaming. My husband and I don't have children and

probably won't have any. We have talked about it but haven't decided anything. I think how my mother would let me run through the sprinkler when I was little, how she would let me stand under the dogwoods along the front porch in the rain.

A cupboard opens and closes behind me. "Oh," Anita says, as if something terrible is wrong.

I turn and see her standing at the sink holding a tall glass in each hand. Sunlight catches the clear glasses and they are like soft glowing lights. "Tap on the window and make those jays go away," she says. "They are stealers. You know they eat the other birds' eggs and then won't let the red birds up to the feeder to eat." She hurries to the window and putting her face close to the glass yells "Shooo" and the jays fly up and then light on the edge of a galvanized tub planted with geraniums and thick with weeds. She turns and goes back to the sink where she leans on the white enamel, pausing to catch her breath. She turns on the faucet and runs water over the ice tray to loosen the cubes.

"Baby-Dog never learned to walk," she says. She drops ice into the glasses. "He thought he had to run everywhere."

She has told me this before.

I say, "I remember seeing him run up the stairs to the bedroom where you had those squeaky toys and stuffed rabbits for him to chew." I have said this before.

She pours tea over the ice and offers me a glass. "Would you like to see him?" she says.

"Of course," I say and smile. I have seen his ashes more times than I can keep track of.

She leads the way across the hall and into the living room where Baby-Dog's urn, copper and shaped like a pear, sits on top of the television. Taking off the lid, she smiles down at the ashes and chunks of bone. Then she closes the urn, picks it up, and holding it against her begins to hum. The tune sounds like one I've heard and I concentrate, trying to remember. Then I do. It's "Blueberry Hill," an old Fats Domino song, one my mother used to sing. Anita hums and steps side to side. She steps out into the living room turning and humming, the skirt of her cotton dress sashaying as she goes.

When my husband comes home that night I tell him that I'm worried about Anita. Once you've experienced the death of someone close to you, all the other deaths that follow bring back the pain and anger that you felt then. It's as if the person you loved is dying all over again. Other than Baby-Dog, and maybe her husband, I can't think of whom she



might have loved. Her parents must be dead but so long dead she never mentions them.

"She'll be okay," my husband says. "It will just take time."

My husband likes sitting in his recliner at night and watching sports on television. It's cold outside, for Florida that is. The pecan trees have lost their leaves and are grey and knobby. On the television a naked woman eats yogurt; the only sound is the beating of her heart. The camera follows her body.

"Oh, boy!" my husband says, gleeful. He and I have not made love in a while, not since I started hurting a lot and nobody understood why. Finally the doctor decided to take a look and inside one of my ovaries he found a thing as big as an apricot with bits of bone and hair. The doctor tells me it had been there since before I was born. There is a name for this condition but I have forgotten it. The doctor explains my body tried to make a baby on its own. It could not, of course.

I remember the last time my husband and I made love, how I felt him drifting, drifting, even as he entered me.

"You're going to leave me the same way Anita's husband left her," I say.

"Here we go," he says.

I pick up the nearest thing, a lamp, and throw it at him, but I have never had a very good aim. The lamp hits the wall behind him. The sound of the glass breaking is at first a shock and then strangely gentle.

\*

I find Anita lying on the ground outside the kitchen window. I crouch down to see if she is alive, but I know she isn't. Her cheeks are splotched blue. I hear a bird fussing and look up to see a bluejay perched on the feeder. Anita must have been about to feed the birds, but I'm not sure. We always imagine what people have just done or were about to do when they died. We like to wonder about this, as if it mattered, as if much of anything but being alive matters.

The day of her funeral clouds churn in the close sky.

"July is always like this," my husband says.

First the unbearable heat, then the rain.

As we walk into the cemetery, wind grabs at the bottom of my new black dress and presses it against my legs. I feel sexy. I remember Anita alive, her small feet pushing against the floor of her porch to get the red swing going. My feet crunch over the path of white pebbles and it's as if we're walking over thousands of glass snakes, their

bodies popping under the soles of our shoes. If the sun weren't hidden by clouds the chunks of snake would shine. When we gather around the casket the mist is so thick that I can barely make out my husband's face and then he takes my hand in his warm one.

## TELLING HER NOW

Every afternoon two Silver Meteors passed a hundred yards from our house in North Florida, one on its way to New York, the other to Miami. Freight trains passed also, but the Silver Meteor was the one that interested my sister Catherine most. It was fast, a metallic streak just beyond our front yard, beyond the lime-rock road. Catherine and I could see the blurred faces of people looking out the broad windows and when the train slowed sometimes the people smiled and waved. We could feel the trains before we heard them, and hear them before we could see them. Catherine would run from wherever she was in the house to the front yard and stand under the shade of Mama's pink dogwood breathing in the smell of the train, the ground under her bare feet jarred by the fast train.

The Silver Meteors clocked our days as much as Daddy's tantrums or having supper at five o'clock sharp, since that was the time he wanted Mama to serve it. Supper usually ended in Catherine's getting whipped with a green pecan branch that Daddy kept on top of the refrigerator. I don't

know how it is in every family, but in ours Daddy was the one we hated. For a long time Mama and Catherine and I all slept in the same room, the blue one in the front of the house, a room so large it easily held two double beds and a dresser, and for a while, when I was a baby, a crib. Then, when Catherine got older, she had her own room upstairs, just over mine and Mama's.

It was after Catherine got her own room that she started to run away, usually at night, usually a boyfriend waited outside, under the giant oak down the road, or, when the boy was brave, under the camphor trees that grew along the front porch. Catherine had so many boyfriends. They all seemed to fall in love with her. Once I saw her flush a diamond ring down the toilet, with no regrets. "I don't love him," she told me. Maybe that was why the boys couldn't stay away from her, they knew that she would never really fall in love with them, never let herself need them. They must have felt free. Her bedroom was upstairs, and she would slip out the window in the dark and down the tin roof to the trees, to the boy. Sometimes she would be gone for weeks.

More than once Daddy threatened to have Catherine put in the Lowell women's prison, a cinder-block building on a treeless hill south of where we lived. I know now, of course, that he could not have done such a thing, could not

have put Catherine in prison, but at the time it seemed to me that he could do anything he wanted to us.

Once Mama and I had gone looking for Catherine. We got in the old green Valiant and headed down one dirt road after another. None of Catherine's friends seemed to know where she was, or if they did know, they weren't going to tell us and then one of them, Sandy Mullet, did. Mama left Sandy's house, a sagging shack on the side of Route 20, and drove directly to a white stucco house at the end of a nearby dirt road.

It was already dark and so cloudy we couldn't see stars. A man wearing white boxer shorts opened the door. "Cat, it's for you," he said. When he turned back into the house I saw in the porch light that his back was smooth and tan.

"Good God in heaven," Mama said. Catherine had bleached her auburn hair so blond it was white. Even I didn't recognize her. Then I saw Mama's hand come up, heard the slap, saw Catherine, not looking at Mama or at me, but looking somewhere into the darkness behind us. I closed my eyes so that all I could see was darkness too.

Mama grabbed my hand and turned us back to the car. But once she got the Valiant back on the dirt road I felt so desperate for Catherine that I told Mama she had to go back. "Not on your life," she said and pushed the gas

pedal. I opened the door and the ground rushed up and sand gobbled in my mouth and Mama screamed and caught my arm just as I felt myself slipping off the seat. "You are so much like your sister I can't believe it," she said.

"Good," I said, which was what I always said when Mama told me this, which was often enough. There was nothing I wanted more than to be like Catherine.

Catherine could do anything. She painted watercolors of endangered animals, gorillas and panthers, eagles. She explained that eagle chicks are so competitive that they will fight and fight until one of them dies. It's a question of survival, Catherine said to me. Otherwise, there wouldn't be enough food and both of them might die. Catherine had blue eyes and freckles and her body was like a rubber band. (I had brown eyes and brown hair cut in a pixie and was so overweight I couldn't do a handstand.) Catherine could do backbends and splits and once won the Hawthorne High School talent contest by springing across the stage and landing in a split. The judges applauded and the men blushed and rubbed the backs of their necks or pressed handkerchiefs to their foreheads in a way that made me think of Daddy and of the neatly pressed handkerchiefs he kept in the top drawer of his dresser. For the talent show Catherine had called herself the Gold Dust Girl.

After the show Daddy tied her to a straight back chair until she apologized for dancing practically naked in front of all Hawthorne and for wearing lipstick, the lipstick seemed especially to have offended him. He also wanted to know where she had found that gold lamé bathing-suit. She refused to tell him. He slapped her and slapped her. I cried and screamed and thought that I would burst if Daddy didn't stop. Mama came to me and held me close and said "hush." Mama stroked my hair holding its short strands taut between her fingers and then letting it go gently. After that I don't know what happened. I don't remember Daddy letting Catherine go though of course he did. That night, and so many nights and days too, are lost, since there is so much that I cannot remember.

One night I asked Catherine if I could sleep with her. I thought that if I did, she wouldn't be able to run away. She told me I would have to ask Mama. I found her in the kitchen washing dishes. Mama kept rubbing her hand over the same soapy plate, as if she had not heard what I said. The kitchen smelled of the burnt hamburgers that, earlier in the evening, Mama had forgotten to turn.

I asked again.

"Ann, you've got your own bed," she said.



I was frantic in the way I think only children or people in love are, certain that if I didn't get my way, that if I couldn't sleep with Catherine, it would be more than I could bear. I screamed and kicked and finally Mama said yes.

Catherine had made her bedroom the best room in the house, an old two-story with rotting porches and darkly varnished walls. The dining room ceiling was nothing but a hole revealing a tangled maze of electrical wiring. Catherine had painted her room white and Mama had bought white sheers for the windows. Catherine's iron bedstead, which she found in a neighbor's shed rusted and left for junk, was painted white and gold.

We sank into her bed, a feather mattress that had belonged to our grandmother. Mornings Catherine fluffed the mattress up and then ran a broom handle over it to smooth wrinkles. Now she rubbed my back and sang to me, "Sunshine, Lollipops and Rainbows," my favorite song. She sang and she smelled like gardenias.

"Sleep," she said to me.

There were footsteps on the stairs and then the hall light came on and I saw Daddy in the bedroom doorway. He seemed small standing there with the light behind him. He didn't say anything for so long that I thought something might be wrong. "What is it Daddy?" I asked.

He cleared his throat and stepped back into the hall. "It's going to freeze," he said. He went into the junk room to look for rags. Whenever the weatherman predicted freezing temperatures, Daddy would wrap the exposed pipes under the house with our old clothes to keep the pipes from bursting, cover the fragile hibiscus and gardenias with old sheets so that the yard at night resembled a ghost dance.

"Let's kill him," Catherine whispered and she laughed, pressing her face into the pillow to muffle the sound, her hair, auburn again and grown long and wild, fell around her head and for a second I thought of Mary Magdalene and imagined Catherine kneeling over the feet of Jesus, washing his feet with her hair. "You hold him down and I'll smother him with this pillow."

"Shh..." I said.

"Then we'll chop him into little pieces and fry him up like bacon," she said.

"Everything okay?" Daddy asked.

"Yes, sir," I said.

The hall light went out, and we heard Daddy's footsteps on the stairs.

"You could have gotten us both in trouble," I said.

"No," she said. "He won't hurt you."

"He'll hurt us," I said. "You and me."

"There is no you and me," she said.

I heard dogs barking faraway.

The next morning I woke to find Catherine still there. She was sleeping on her back, arms flung over her head. It was early morning and sunny and cold. Catherine opened her eyes. She was crying. She sat up and shook her hair. I don't know now if Catherine was beautiful, but I thought she was then.

"Isn't this silly?" she said.

I didn't know what to say; I had never seen her cry. But I wanted to touch her. I wanted to feel the wildness of her hair.

It wasn't long before Catherine had run away again, and I understood then that I would never be able to stop her, that there was nothing I could do. She left her bed fluffed and smoothed, as if nobody had slept there at all. When she telephoned a couple of weeks later, it was Christmas Eve, and Daddy and I were watching one of our favorite shows, "The Twilight Zone." After the second ring the wood floor shook and then I heard Mama. "Where?" she said and Daddy turned the television up; on the screen a man had found a camera that took pictures of people's futures. Mama called to me, "Ann, your sister wants to tell you something."

"Sis, I have a present for you in the back of Daddy's closet," Catherine said to me.

I had intended to beg her to come home for Christmas, to tell her how much I missed her. Now all I could think about was my present. I found it just as she had promised, a bride doll almost as big as I was, dressed in a white satin gown and hidden behind Daddy's faded work clothes. The doll had blue eyes and auburn hair like Mama and Catherine.

Christmas morning I found Mama in the kitchen spreading chocolate icing. A pitcher of tea sat on the counter, a scoop of white sugar melting in the bottom, next to a yellow bowl of potato salad.

Mama rolled a chicken thigh in flour and dropped it into her iron frying pan. "She's been in Miami; she just wanted to see what it was like I guess, but I think she's decided home isn't so bad after all."

"Did she take the train?" I asked, thinking she must have, or one of her boyfriend's might have given her a ride.

"Don't be jealous," Mama said. She rolled the last piece of chicken in the flour. "You can come with me to the station to pick your sister up."

Later that morning Mama and I heard the telephone but let Daddy get it. After a minute he came and stood in the kitchen door.

"Catherine has been detained," Daddy said quietly. I wondered if he was angry. "That was the word he used, detained."

"Who?" Mama wanted to know.

"Some guy," Daddy said.

Sunlight hit the faded linoleum where a ragged edge had started to pull away from the dull wood.

"So, what's wrong?" Mama untied her apron.

"There's been an accident," Daddy said. "The Silver Meteor Cat was headed home on went off the rail." Mama started out of the kitchen, but Daddy's arm swung up and blocked the doorway. "Catherine is okay," he said. "She's got a broken foot, that's all. She'll be home tomorrow, unless she changes her mind." He dropped his arm. "Everything is fine."

A gold Corvette drove up the next afternoon and Catherine got out with her crutches and her blue Samsonite overnight bag. She was wearing a short satin dress and one foot was bandaged in gauze.

"Who was that?" Daddy said and opened the screen door.

"A friend," she said.

"Bet you loved this," Mama said, holding up a Winter Haven newspaper we had been looking at. Catherine's photograph was on the front page.

We were all standing in the hall. "You look great," I said. She was like a movie star.

"Who would have expected such a thing?" Mama said. "A train accident."

"It doesn't mean that it couldn't happen," Catherine said and smiled. "Sometimes the thing you expect not to happen does."

\*

Not long ago I got a letter from Mama. I live in a condominium in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina now, about three hundred miles from the old house in North Florida. There are no trains nearby, no feather beds, no exposed pipes that need to be covered. I live by myself but I have dated so many men. Not that I am pretty but I have discovered that being pretty isn't as important as I might have thought. Catherine got married to an insurance man and moved to Tallahassee, just two hours north of Mama and Daddy, though they never see her. Now and then Catherine promises to visit them but before she arrives something happens, the car breaks down halfway there and she has to

turn back, or she has to work, at a photo lab in the outskirts of the capital. This is what Mama has told me. Catherine and I don't talk, haven't talked in years. Not that I haven't tried. She just never called me back so I quit calling her. Sooner or later you get the message that somebody wants to be left alone.

Mama writes: Dear Ann, It's hot as blazes here but you know how that is and I guess it's hot up there where you are just like it is here. The excitement here is that the neighbor's house burned down and that fire was so hot that the side of our house sweated, pine sap bubbled up through the white paint, I have never seen anything like it. The Hawthorne Fire Department got there too late, as you would expect. Love, Mama and Daddy. P.S. Your sister told me the other day on the telephone that Daddy had bothered her when you were girls. I don't believe it. She has always wanted to cause trouble and to be the center of attention.

In her letter Mama had enclosed two photographs, one of herself and another of Catherine. The one of Mama is small, a Polaroid that develops instantly. She looks frail and older than I remember. I wonder for a moment who is taking the picture and then realize it has to be Daddy. Mama's wearing a loose flowered shift and yellow flip-flops. Her auburn hair has gone white. The photograph of Catherine is a large black-and-white of her Hula-Hooping. I

look at it hard, as if something in it will tell me the truth. But Catherine's face is a blur, like the faces of the people on the Silver Meteor that used to speed past our house.

I leave the letter and the photographs on the kitchen table and take a shower, the water is as hot as I can stand. I feel dirty inside. I think that I will have to ask my therapist about this. I have been seeing her for a year or so. She is an old woman with a metal rod for a calf and foot and every time she sits the metal leg pops straight out. I have told her everything about my life that I can remember, which isn't much. I have told her about my recurring dream where the doors of the old house open and close and Catherine is on the other side and it is dark, dark like the night that Mama and I found Catherine, the night that a strange man turned to call her. The therapist lets me talk, lets me stare at her metal leg. Her hands are spotted and ribbed from the sun and I watch them flutter up like ancient birds.

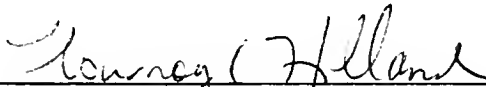
The shower is almost too hot, scalding, and it pummels my shoulders, my breasts. I look at the inside of my arms, wrists, see the blue veins under the surface of the thin skin. I think of rivers worrying banks, pulling at the roots of trees, carrying away chunks of earth and changing the landscape forever.




## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Suzanne Carlton O'Leary was born in Gainesville, Florida, and grew up in Campville, Florida. She lived for several years in France, where she taught English. She received a bachelor of science degree in news and editorial journalism from the University of Florida. In addition to having taught English, she has worked as an editor, a reporter, and a freelance writer. She lives with her husband, George Jay O'Leary, a poet, and their cats, Agnes Mae, Tibo, and Ludwig.

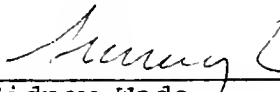
I certify that I have read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a thesis for the degree of Master of Fine Arts.

  
Flournoy C. Holland, Chair  
Assistant Professor of English

I certify that I have read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a thesis for the degree of Master of Fine Arts.

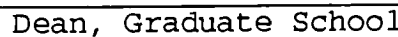
  
William Logan  
Professor of English

I certify that I have read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a thesis for the degree of Master of Fine Arts.

  
Sidney Wade  
Assistant Professor of English

This thesis was presented to the Graduate Faculty of the Department of English in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences and to the Graduate School and was accepted as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts.

December, 1996

  
Dean, Graduate School

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